

CROWD OF ONE

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The characters in this book are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

For T and Marv.

“Men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate
their actions.”

Edward Bernays

1

Marlon feels a drop of sweat sliding down the arch of his back.

“Old money,” says Pat LaFontaine as he stirs his coffee, the metal spoon scraping the inside of the cup. “You inherit it, hide it, and then you shut up about it.”

Marlon nods.

“But,” says LaFontaine, “what happens when it gets so rotten that not even the owner can stand the smell?”

LaFontaine stares at Marlon with his bright eyes. Marlon is confused. *Was that a rhetorical question, or is Mr. LaFontaine expecting an answer?*

It’s a warm evening in July. The spacious office on the seventh floor stands silent. Distant car honks are heard from the traffic outside.

LaFontaine leans back in his chair behind the thick wooden desk. He squinches his eyes and wrinkles his forehead.

Marlon sits up straight and swallows hard.

“Do you like history?” asks LaFontaine, and he turns towards the window, which offers a modest but notable view of the majestic Arc de Triomphe. “I have always wondered. . . . Some have argued that Napoleon paved the way for the French Revolution to succeed, whereas others believe that it was the revolution that paved the way for Napoleon to lead.” LaFontaine turns back to Marlon. “What do you think?”

“It depends,” says Marlon, and he clears his throat. “I do think he helped lead the society towards change. But I also believe that the public was heading in that direction with or without him. At the end of the day, Napoleon helped intensify their cause through his willingness to lead.”

LaFontaine frowns. “So you argue that he was an opportunist?”

“Yes, but not that he didn’t support the ideals of the revolution.”

LaFontaine’s serious face relaxes into a modest smile. Then he turns towards the window again. “Most people believe that you can persuade an audience by writing a moving speech,” he says. “That’s only the tip of the iceberg.” He turns back to Marlon. “You see, an orator cannot create a true relationship with his audience from thin air. Before he delivers his message, a connection must already exist. Through this connection, he can either intensify or destroy his popularity with the audience.” LaFontaine lifts his finger in the air. “But how do you

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figure out what connects you with your audience, and how do you exploit it to your favor?"

"Exactly," says Marlon, nodding.

LaFontaine looks at him, puzzled.

Marlon stops nodding and feels his nervous fingers digging into the top of his thighs.

LaFontaine sits quietly. He tilts his head and stares into Marlon's skull.

Stay calm, thinks Marlon. Mr. LaFontaine is testing my nerves. He wants me to break down and start mumbling. If I do, I have failed.

They stare at each other in silence. The atmosphere turns awkward.

Marlon begins to hesitate. LaFontaine is expecting him to say something. But what? He already forgot what he was being asked. He starts feeling lightheaded.

LaFontaine lights up with a satisfied grin and nods his head. He stands up and pulls out a cigarette. "Want one?"

Marlon feels a fresh wave of relief washing through the room. "No thanks," he says. "I don't smoke."

"Good. Neither do I," says LaFontaine, walking over to the window, inviting the buzzing sound from the street outside. He lights up his cigarette and leans against the railing of the French balcony. "I was your age when I first came here," he says. "All I had was a map of the metro and my French-Canadian accent. But my timing was off back then. That's why I moved down to the states." He fills the air with smoke and gazes out across the Parisian rooftops. "Now, the cracks are widening, and the tables are about to turn. What you see out there is a society in freefall, ready to crash and rebuild itself. That's why I came back. The old continent is facing another turnaround."

Marlon is exhausted. Before meeting with LaFontaine, he had to go through three grueling interviews. Each one lasting over an hour and conducted one floor higher up in the building.

Keep it up, Marlon tells himself. Despite the awkward moment, he still feels like the two of them are connecting in some way. He takes a deep breath and observes LaFontaine smoking his cigarette. He looks good for being in his mid-fifties, thinks Marlon. He has thick grayish hair, a healthy-looking tan, and a well-kept physique. The material of his tailored navy-blue suit looks soft and expensive, fitted against his body like a comfortable pajama. He wears a crisp white shirt, with the two top buttons undone. His dark-brown leather shoes are well-polished. His gold vintage watch is distinct but discreet.

Marlon lets his eyes wander about the room. A few moving boxes stand along the wall, and a mixed collection of both subtle and lively ties lay on top of one of them. Marlon figures that LaFontaine picks his ties depending on the occasion. He might even go through several ties per day. In the online interview, he had worn a dark, plain-colored tie.

LaFontaine finishes half of his cigarette and walks back to his desk. "We are a small team," he says. "But we are set up to grow. Our headquarters is in Paris, but our focus is pan-European. Although the continent has its differences, the trends are the same. We operate in a context that demands a high level of diplomacy and cultural resilience. Many think they can handle such a context because they have a double degree or speak five languages. That's not what we are looking for here. We need people with

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stamina. Do you think you have the stamina to work with us, Marlon?”

“Yes,” says Marlon with a steady voice.

LaFontaine smiles with the corner of his mouth. He puts his hands on his desk and leans in. “This is the beginning of a revolution, Marlon. It is happening. For five years, we have worked day and night to build this machine. Every cogwheel is oiled up and ready to go.” LaFontaine starts drumming with his hands against the wooden desk. “All we need now are smart, brave, and hungry people like you to put it in motion and go to work.” He stops drumming and slams his palms against the desk. “I like you, Marlon. You have good eyes. If you decide to join us, you can stay as long as you want, and you can leave whenever you want. All I ask from you is to be true to yourself, your colleagues, and me. How do you like that?”

Marlon swallows. He isn’t sure, but he thinks LaFontaine has just offered him the job. He breaks out into a genuine smile.

LaFontaine smiles too. Then he spread out his arms. “What do you say? Want to have a look at the world from our windows?”

“Yes,” says Marlon. “Yes, I would like that very much.”

LaFontaine reaches out his hand. “Great, let’s shake on that.” He pauses. “A piece of advice, however. Never accept anything up front.”

“Right,” says Marlon, and he corrects his posture.

LaFontaine picks up a thin paper folder from his desk and hands it to Marlon. “Read up on that before you meet with Beatrice tomorrow. She’s in charge of all the contracts.”

“Thanks.”

“Another piece of advice,” says LaFontaine. “Don’t stare yourself blind on your taxable paycheck. It’s not about what you make. It’s about what you own.”

Marlon nods.

“I’m serious,” says LaFontaine. “The quicker you learn how this works, the more you’ll be able to squeeze out of this system before it goes belly-up.”

“Right, I get it.”

“I can see myself in you, Marlon. Men like us don’t settle for the situation given to us by chance. We get out there, we explore, and we take charge. We create our own vision of what we stand for and how we want to be remembered.”

Marlon soaks up the flatter.

“I’m late for a flight to Geneva,” says LaFontaine. “So, I’ll cut to the chase. We offer all fresh recruits a first-year salary of forty thousand euros plus a year-end bonus. After that, we’ll sit down and negotiate how we can get you to stay for another year. Sound good?”

Marlon nods his head. “Yes,” he says. “Sounds good.”

“Great,” says LaFontaine as he walks over to the boxes along the wall and picks up an all-black tie. “Welcome to the team. What’s more, you’ll be the first full-blooded Yankee on the roster.”

“Thank you,” says Marlon and stands up. “And thank you for your time. I truly appreciate it.”

“Alright, Rita will help you now,” says LaFontaine and throws the tie around his neck.

Rita, LaFontaine’s assistant, enters the office. She gives Marlon a warm smile before she leads him out of the office and towards the elevator.

Rita looks to be in her late thirties, with a confident step.

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“I received the diploma from your school,” says Rita in fluent but accented English.

“Do you need anything else?”

“No, we have everything we need. I booked you a train ticket back to London tomorrow afternoon.”

As they reach the elevators, Rita holds out her hand. “You are going to like it here,” she says. “Welcome.”

When the elevator doors close, Marlon shuts his eyes. He clenches his fist and throws himself into a silent gesture of celebration. *I did it*, he thinks. The job is his. He took it. No more clunky job forms to fill in online. No more worrying about buying a one-way ticket back home to Maine. He is staying in Europe.

Marlon exits the building and walks down the street towards the Seine—the wide and mighty river that splits the city of Paris in two. He doesn’t know where he is going. He needs a moment to take it all in. He thinks about the day he arrived in London. The summer after high school. That was the moment he understood he was off on his own. A shot at something new. A blank slate and an opportunity to carry on without the looming negativities of the past.

The last four years had prepared him for a new life. Now, he has the opportunity to make it real.

Marlon lets down his shoulders and takes a few deep, calming breaths. He stops and loosens his tie. A subtle sound of water, birds, and distant voices are mixed up in the gentle winds. The Eiffel Tower stands tall against the pinkish sky, glittering with thousands of tiny lights. A boat with tourists floats by in front of him.

He remembers visiting Paris three years ago with a few friends from school. Back then, this moment would seem

unreal. He doesn't even speak the language. Things have changed since London stopped hiring.

He smells warm meat and fries from a nearby restaurant and can feel his stomach calling. He puts his hand into his pocket and pulls out four euros and fifteen cents. It's barely enough for a starter, he thinks. The tie and the new shoes had ruined him. Fortunately, Atlas Analytica had paid for his trip and the hotel. He smiles to himself. All that doesn't matter anymore. Starting next month, he will have a job and a salary. He will be able to eat decent food, open a savings account, and start repaying his student debt. He will be on the right track in life.

He puts the money back in his pocket and starts walking up along the Seine. The fresh evening winds cool down his hot skin. His body is beaten, but his mind is lyrical. *This is it*, he thinks. This is what he wanted—to prove that he can make his own way in life. That he is worthwhile.

2

“How much are you pulling in over there, Marlon?”

“About fifty.”

“That includes your bonus?”

“More or less.”

“After how many years?”

“About four years. Or, three and a half to be exact.”

“You need to start jumping ships, man. You know Randy?”

“What about him?”

“I met him at my dad’s charity, and he’s pulling in over a hundred G’s on some tech job out in Brooklyn. No joke. Remember, we always thought he was retarded or something.”

“Good for him.”

“I’m just saying, man. What about you, Greg?”

“Thirty-five plus commission. I’m still building my portfolio. I’ll double it by next year.” Greg looks down at his cards. “It’s different up here. It’s not like New York.”

Marlon knew that Cole would start comparing salaries. It reminds him why he felt reluctant about going to the get-together in the first place. The only thing they have in common is having gone to the same high school. Marlon doesn’t even consider him a real friend anymore. How could he be? They only meet every other year or so when they’re all back for the holidays visiting their parents. Except for Billy, of course. He’s still a friend. Although they only talk twice a year since Marlon left for Europe. Marlon and Billy used to be inseparable. Both attended the state’s elite program of youth swimmers, sharing the same intense training schedule and the dream of competing in the Olympics. For Marlon, that dream came to an end during his last semester in high school. He has barely seen a swimming pool since. Billy earned a scholarship to attend the University of Southern California. He never made it to the national team, but he still lives out there, working as a swimming coach and personal trainer.

“I remember my dog years,” says Cole. “I’m telling you, once you guys hit those six figures, you’ll know what’s up.”

“I’ll tell you what’s up,” says Billy. “On top of Marlon’s pay, he has universal healthcare, pension, paid vacation, and whatnot. Isn’t that right, Marlon?”

“Something like that.”

“I heard you get like four weeks of paid vacation over there,” says Greg.

“Officially, we get five, or even six,” says Marlon. “Depends on how you calculate.”

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“I’m more than happy with my twenty-seven thousand a year,” says Billy. “What’s more, I don’t think of it as work.”

“It’s different for you,” says Greg. “You don’t have a debt to pay, and you practically live rent-free.”

“Who cares about free rent,” says Cole. “It’s all about that hard cash, and everybody knows it. If you got cash flow, everything else takes care of itself.”

“Cash is king,” says Gary. “Get rich or die trying, am I right?”

“I’ll drink to that,” says Cole and lifts his beer bottle. “If you work hard, you get to play hard.”

Gary mimics the gesture. “Fucking right.”

Before Marlon moved out on his own, he didn’t understand why his parents always seemed short on cash. They were both hard workers and never splurged on expenses. Now, he gets it. It’s not about how hard you stomp the grapes but about how juicy the grapes are.

Last year, Marlon brought in a big chunk of Atlas Analytica’s business. He knows that his pay didn’t reflect his performance, but he is okay with that. The company is still growing, and everyone is taking a hit on their paychecks. He knows that LaFontaine has his back in the long run.

When they were thirteen years old, Marlon’s and Cole’s fathers had teamed up to run a social summer program for the town’s military veterans. Back then, Marlon’s father worked as an intelligence officer in the United States Army, and Cole’s father was a lawyer and state politician.

They ran the program from an office downtown and often took their sons along. One afternoon, Marlon and Cole were playing basketball at a nearby park. Neither had been in the area before. So when a group of local kids approached the court, they had the group's immediate interest. The local kids stepped straight onto their court and asked for the ball. Cole and Marlon picked up the aggressive vibe but felt like they had little choice about what to do. After all, it was a public court. Cole passed over the ball, and the local kids began playing among themselves. After a few minutes, it was evident that the group had no intention to involve their newfound friends in their game, basically ignoring their presence on the court. Following a few failed attempts to communicate, Cole snatched the ball back.

"We need to leave," said Cole.

"What!" the kid yelled at Cole. "Give us our ball back."

"Right," said Cole and turned his back. "It's my ball."

The kid smirked, almost looking satisfied. The other kids began to laugh. One kid ran after Cole and slammed the ball out of his grip. Cole pushed the kid in his chest. That's when it kicked off. Without a sign of hesitation, the kids surrounded Cole like a clan of wolves preparing for a quick kill. One kid punched Cole in the stomach, making him fall to the ground. Marlon took a stiff step forward, but someone pulled out a pocket knife and held it in front of his face, warning him not to intervene. The local kids acted like they had rehearsed the scenario a hundred times before. Cole lay helpless on the ground while the kids kicked and stomped on his body. Marlon still remembers the feelings of fear and frustration rushing through his body. He wanted to help, to do something. But with the

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knife pointed at his mouth, it appeared as if his nervous system had decided to disconnect from his mind to act on its own. His muscles were locked in shock, and his heart was blocking his throat.

Eventually, one kid held back the others and leaned over Cole. "Enough," he said.

Marlon felt relieved, hoping the assault would stop.

The kid began to unlace Cole's new basketball shoes while the others looted his pockets. They did the same to Marlon, but they had no interest in his worn-out tennis shoes.

Marlon and Cole had less than five bucks between them, but the kids didn't seem to care. The act was symbolic.

"Whitewashed bitch," said one kid who spat towards Cole. "Fuck you think you are."

Marlon had looked into Cole's blank and humiliated eyes, repulsed by the slimy, disgusting goo gliding down his cheek.

A few bystanders were in the park, but nobody appeared to register what was going on. After the assault, the kids had calmly walked away, seemingly unbothered and unafraid of being confronted for what they had just done. Luckily, Cole had been able to block most kicks with his arms and feet. His injuries were shallow, and none against his head. Marlon helped Cole back on his feet and suggested they run straight back to his father's office. To his surprise, Cole had insisted not to. Instead, he urged Marlon to go back to the office and get Cole's wallet. He wanted them to go to the nearby mall and buy another basketball and a new pair of identical shoes. Marlon had been baffled by the suggestion. But eventually he gave in. After all, he thought, Cole was the greater victim. He

figured that he had the right to choose. Cole begged Marlon never to mention to anyone what had happened. Although Marlon didn't like it, he had agreed. And that was that, he thought.

Three weeks later, when the school holiday was over, Marlon and Cole went back to their respective groups of friends. At a lunch break, Cole and two of his older buddies had dragged Marlon to a secluded area behind the gym. The two guys told Marlon he owed Cole for his new shoes and basketball. They told him to pay up that evening, or the fee would double each day. Marlon had looked at Cole, searching for an explanation. Cole had remained cold, staring back at him with crossed arms and a raised chin.

Coming home that afternoon, Marlon felt both torn and devastated. He wondered if they were right. Did Marlon owe Cole, or were they taking advantage of him?

Later that evening Marlon broke down in front of his parents. After telling them about the incident, they had called Cole's parents who, in turn, had made their son call Marlon to deliver a forced apology. It all ended up feeling weird, for everyone. Afterward, Marlon and Cole continued being friends through a somewhat distant relationship. Marlon still feels sad and puzzled when thinking back on what happened. Although they were young and didn't know any better, he still questions his behavior and whether he did the right thing. He also isn't sure whether Cole had been forced into doing what he did or if his action was the result of peer pressure. The same goes for the gang in the park. The mind of a crowd is a different beast than that of an individual, he thought. It's

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strong, authoritative, and capable of a brutality that most individuals are not.

“I met this girl in the city the other day,” says Cole. “She wasn’t like a ten or anything, but we connected on Facebook and all that. When I got home, I checked her out on Instagram, and she has like forty thousand followers.”

“What’s she doing?” asks Greg.

“That’s the thing. She was working as a marketing assistant or something. And judging by her looks, I would say that she was in the league of having a few hundred followers, tops. Okay, maybe a few thousands if she shows some ass, but not in the league of forty thousand. No way.”

“She’s a fake,” says Greg and shakes his head.

“I didn’t care at first,” says Cole. “But it kept bugging me, because if you got forty thousand followers, you got to be doing something worthwhile, right?”

“So, you asked her?”

“I asked her straight up, and guess what she said?”

“What did she say?” asks Greg impatiently.

“She said it was because of her originality and for simply keeping it real.” Cole starts laughing. “That’s when I knew her followers were bought. She probably spends a small fortune to keep those likes coming all day too. Not to be called on it, you know.”

“Show me her account,” says Greg.

Cole pulls out his phone and shows them her Instagram account.

“Too obvious,” says Greg. “She’s a nobody.”

“Why even bother?” says Cole. “The formula for attention is simple. Show some skin and then some. You can’t change the name of the game, right?”

“What about your followers, Cole?” asks Billy. “Don’t you have a few thousand?”

“All organic,” says Cole. “Since I was backstage at that Tidal concert, they’ve continued adding up. I guess people think I’m on the inside. I don’t know.”

Marlon is probably the only one at the table who can find out who has fake followers or not. Atlas Analytica’s research team buys frequent reports from all the top providers—those that help boost social media accounts with artificial followers, likes, shares, and comments. They’ve started buying that information to improve the quality of their database. Although most of those providers pledge client confidentiality, they still sell the data to firms like Atlas Analytica through the backdoor by using various loopholes and confidentiality agreements. Just like most online companies do.

“I’m all in,” says Cole.

“I’ll call you,” says Billy and pushes all his marks to the middle of the table.

Marlon looks at his watch and glances at his cards. His hand is worthless. “Me too,” he says and pushes all his marks into the pot.

“Are you leaving tomorrow?” Billy asks Marlon.

“Yes, around noon from Logan. My dad will drive me down there early in the morning, so I need to get my packing done tonight.”

Cole brings home the pot.

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“Maybe we should leave, then,” says Billy. “I’m flying down to Florida tomorrow evening to start preparing for our winter camp.”

“Sure,” says Marlon, pulling back his chair. “Let’s get going.”

Marlon and Billy finish their beers and start saying goodbye to Cole, Greg, and the rest of the guys playing on Greg’s Xbox. They all wish each other a Happy New Year and make loose promises to meet again soon.

Marlon and Billy put on their coats and hurry out to the old Volvo Billy has borrowed from his mom.

“It needs to warm up for a minute,” says Billy and turns the ignition.

Marlon leans back in the cold seat, rubbing his hands together to work up some heat. “It was nice seeing you again,” he says.

“It was,” says Billy. “I need to get over there and visit you sometime.”

“Whenever is good for you. You know that.”

“What about June? We usually take a week off at the end of the month.”

“That should work.”

“Great.”

Marlon knows that it is never going to happen. Neither has visited the other for the past seven years or so.

“Do you have anywhere to swim over there?” asks Billy.

“To be honest, I haven’t swum much since high school.”

“You should. You are a good swimmer. A lot better than many of the guys I swam with in college. I’m telling you, none of them had your talent.”

Marlon can tell that Billy is trying to be nice, and he hates it. He can’t stand when people remind him of that time of

his life. It doesn't mean anything to him now, and he prefers to forget about it.

"Can you believe that Greg is about to become a father?" says Marlon.

"Yeah, it's unbelievable."

"Has he even traveled outside the state?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if he hasn't," says Billy and laughs.

"Soon he will be driving that kid to the same school we went to and relive our entire childhood. It makes me want to crawl out of my skin just thinking about it."

"Well, we all want different things."

"Yeah," says Marlon. "I'm sorry. I'm being a prick. Of course, I'm happy for him."

"C'mon now. You don't have to pretend you care for those guys; not with me."

"It's not that I hold a grudge towards any of them, but they remind me of a person I can't identify with anymore."

"I don't get why Cole has to bring up the topic of salaries every year. We all know that he got shoehorned into Dartmouth and that cushy job because of his dad."

"At least he is making some good money."

"Since when did you start caring about money?"

"I don't," says Marlon. "But I've been thinking lately."

"About what?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying that if I'm going to spend all this time working, I might as well cash out and start doing something I like."

"I'm sorry for asking, but what is it that you are doing over there again?"

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“It’s hard to explain,” says Marlon. “It’s like a technology and communications firm. Kind of like a modern public relations firm, if that makes any sense.”

“How does that work?”

“We gather online information on people’s personality traits and then use that information to push targeted articles, ads, and that kind of stuff.”

“Like Facebook, you mean?”

“Not really. Facebook is an aggregator of content. We create content and then use aggregation platforms such as Facebook for distribution.”

“So you create content?”

“We contract people who create the actual content. Our thing is that we know what type of content that speaks to a specific individual.”

“Where do you get that information from?”

“People give it away for free by doing stuff online. You know, answering questionnaires, liking, sharing, commenting. All that kind of stuff.”

“Is that legal?”

“For sure; that’s the whole idea.”

“Even here, in the U.S.?”

“Online privacy laws are even sloppier here than in Europe.”

“Then what, you infiltrate people’s social media feeds and push whatever content you are paid to push?”

“We don’t really push. The content usually spreads by itself.”

“I see,” says Billy, looking out the window. “No offense, but I hate online ads.”

“We don’t do ads. We publish authentic stuff. Information and facts. Things that get people involved.”

“Sounds cool,” says Billy and starts backing out the driveway. “Honestly, though. I’m not too involved with the social media scene these days. I wouldn’t know.”

Marlon has lost Billy’s attention. He doesn’t blame him. Even Marlon gets bored talking about his job nowadays.

“You said that you are thinking about doing something new,” says Billy.

“I don’t know,” says Marlon. “What about you?”

“I’ll tell you this,” says Billy. “Find something you love to do and do it. I promise you, if you do that, you will stop thinking about money or change and all that. You’ll be busy living life.”

“Right,” says Marlon.

“It’s like training for a big championship. If you stop halfway through a training session to ask yourself why you are doing it, you might as well hit the showers and go home until you’ve figured things out. If you’re not convinced that you’re going for the win, then what’s the point?”

Marlon nods his head. “I agree,” he says. “It needs to come from the heart.”

“That’s what I’m telling my guys every time I see a lack of focus.”

Marlon glances over at Billy. Sometimes he wonders whether swimming was the only thing they had in common. He barely remembers them having had a deeper discussion about anything else. Billy never seemed to question why Marlon left everything behind and went to Europe. On the other hand, Marlon never really tried to talk to him about it either. He just figured that Billy would understand.

3

Marlon was born in Germany while his father was stationed at the U.S. military base in Frankfurt for a three-year-long mission. Marlon can't remember anything from the time but knows it was a happy period for his parents. He can tell from the photo albums that his mother keeps. They are filled with memories from trips to nearby villages and neighboring countries. Both of his parents are glowing in the photos. Young, healthy, and happy. During that time, his mother even became fluent in German. When his father's mission came to an end, they moved back home to Maine—the birthplace of his parents.

Back home, his father continued to work as a contractor to the military and spent most of the weekdays away from home. His mother picked up work as a middle-school teacher, except for the year after the miscarriage. That year his mother didn't work at all. Marlon was six years old and

remembers feeling sad without understanding why. He recalls crying because his mother had cried. That year his parents became quieter and more reserved. This was especially true for his mother. She became depressed and fell out with his father's parents. She'd decided that they were no longer allowed to take Marlon to church during the holidays. Although Marlon enjoyed following his grandparents to church, she'd refused. She didn't want Marlon to have anything to do with the church, she said. During the following year, his grandparents passed away. Marlon and his parents attended both wakes together. His mother had prayed and cried. Marlon never understood that. Maybe it had something to do with her own parents, he thought. Both had passed away before Marlon was born.

Growing up, Marlon never thought about religion as a serious doctrine. In fact, he barely thought of it at all. He still sees the old crucifix buried in his father's drawer as nothing more than a relic from the past.

After returning from Greg's get-together, Marlon meets his father in the kitchen.

"When do we leave tomorrow?" asks his father.

"The flight is at eleven. If we leave after five, we should be good," says Marlon.

His father opens the fridge and cracks out a few ice cubes into a glass. Then he opens the top cabinet and pulls out a bottle of Old Crow bourbon. "Nightcap?" he asks.

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"I'm good, thanks," says Marlon and leans against the doorway, watching his father's back as he pours his drink. "Thanks for the headphones again," he says.

"You're welcome," says his father. "We know that you travel a lot, and you like music."

"It's perfect," says Marlon. "I've probably lost a couple during the years."

His father turns around and takes a sip of his drink. "Otherwise, how's your situation—you know, moneywise?"

"I'm good. You know that."

"If you need anything, you know that you can talk to us, right?"

"Don't worry, Dad. I've got it under control."

"I know you do. Probably have a decent buffer by now."

"Of course," says Marlon, bothered by the fact that he feels obliged to lie to his father's face.

Despite earning above average, Marlon has little cash in his savings account. After paying thirty percent in income tax, twelve hundred euros a month in rent, repaying his fifty thousand euros in student debt, plus all the other bills that come with living in a big city, there isn't much left each month to transfer to his zero-interest-bearing savings account.

"By the way, how is Billy doing?"

"He's doing good. He said 'hi' to you and Mum."

"Billy's a good kid. I met his mother this other day. She's good people too."

"Yeah, they are both good people," says Marlon and nods.

On a calm Sunday evening, early in the spring of Marlon's senior year in high school, his parents asked him to join them in the kitchen. There was an anxious atmosphere in the room. His mother appeared stiff and uneasy, whereas his father seemed dashed and drained. Marlon sat down in front of them at the kitchen table. His father began by performing an odd speech about how proud he was of his son's accomplishments. Although flattered, Marlon knew the monologue was leading up to something else. Then, after a short silence, his father laid it out. He nervously explained that they had lost a large part of their savings, including the money in Marlon's college fund.

Despite the negative news, his father had tried to stay upbeat.

"When the market returns to normal," said his father, "we'll get it all back."

Marlon knew it wasn't true. He knew that his father had invested in that real estate project at the outskirts of the city. He knew that the developers had pulled the plug and that all the money was gone. Marlon didn't ask how much they had lost. He figured that it was better to assume nothing was left. His father didn't know anything about real estate, and he had most likely been played for a fool.

Whatever words came out of his father's mouth, his body language said it all. He was tired and defeated. Marlon could tell that he wanted to let it all go and give up. At one point, the two of them looked at each other before his father's eyes fell towards the table. Marlon knew what went through his father's mind. That was the worst. They both knew.

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Since moving out, Marlon's old room had been transformed into a storage room for all the things his parents didn't know where else to put. Marlon doesn't mind knowing that his childhood stuff has been packed into boxes and stored in the garage because every time he comes back to visit, he feels assured that he has moved on.

While packing his bag, Marlon catches his mother standing in the doorway.

"Do you remember when you wanted to be a teacher?" she says.

"That was then."

"You would be a great teacher."

"You can't make a living teaching."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean it like that."

"I know," she says and walks to him and kisses him on the forehead.

"Are you coming with us to the airport tomorrow?" he asks.

"I will try not to cry this time."

Marlon can see his mother's eyes turning blank as she speaks about it. "By the way," he says. "Thanks for the washing. It's nice to get back home with a bag filled with only clean clothes."

"Of course," she says and wipes away a tear. "You know, having you over there makes me feel like I am there too."

"You and Dad should come and visit me."

“Last time I was in Paris, I was pregnant with you. We went there over the weekend. I remember how close it was to Frankfurt but still so different.”

“Everything is close to Paris. It’s the heart of Europe. When you come to visit, we could go wherever you want.”

“Your father must recover from his surgery first. This time, it was more expensive than what we had planned for.”

“I can help out with the tickets. I have a bunch of award miles that you could use.”

“No, save those for yourself,” she says. “You’ve earned them.”

“I’m just saying. And if Dad can’t come, you can come by yourself.”

“Yes, but you know.”

“Of course, I was just saying.”

“I will talk to your father about it,” she says. “Can I get you anything?”

“I’m good, thanks. I will finish packing.”

“Come downstairs when you are finished. I will put on some tea.”

Marlon looks at his mother walking down the stairs. Like his father, her body has aged since he moved away. He can tell by the way she grips the banister to ease the weight on her knees. It hurts him every time he observes his parents’ fragility. He wants to see it for what it is—a natural process—but his mind seems eager to keep him in a state of denial.

Marlon used to be close to his mother, but after he moved to Europe, they seem to have grown further apart every year. He doesn’t know why, and it hurts him. He tries to call as often as he can, but it isn’t the same. The

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time difference makes it complicated, and their discussions never reach any depth. Once, he helped her set up an email account, but she has never given computers a chance. He has thought about writing her letters by hand, but he hasn't gotten around to it yet. Sometimes he feels like he is a lousy son. That he should be more like Greg. Buy a house nearby and start a family while his parents are still healthy and sound. His mother has never said anything to him about it, although sometimes he thinks he can detect a sign of disappointment in her voice. He knows that she'd wanted more children. Now, with Marlon being so far away, she only has his father around. And his father's back injury has started to take its toll both physically and financially. Marlon is afraid that his mother feels like he has abandoned her. Her only son and family.

During the winter months, Marlon's father was around the house more. Marlon liked to have his father around. He used to drive Marlon to his eight o'clock swimming practice every Saturday morning. Afterward, they would pick up his mother and head downtown to eat brunch. Sometimes they would catch an afternoon movie at the theatre. Whatever his parents had argued about the night before, it was forgotten when they picked her up at the house. When his mother sat down in the passenger seat, his father would kiss her and use his hand to stroke her chin. She would smile and turn around to ask Marlon about his practice. Marlon would answer with enthusiasm and describe the entire experience in detail. During the brunch, his parents would sit opposite Marlon. His father's

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arm was around his mother's back, and her hand rested on his father's knee. Those moments are the happiest memories Marlon has of them as a family. He remembers wishing things could always be like that. All three of them having fun together.

As Marlon grew older, the Saturday ritual became less frequent. Later, in his teens, it stopped altogether.

4

“Send your father a text message when you arrive,” says his mom, and she wraps her arms around him. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” says Marlon and kisses his mother on the cheek. He then turns to his father and gives him a firm hug and two pats on his back. “Thanks for everything, Dad. I’ll see you soon.”

“Be careful when you arrive. It’s New Year’s Eve and major holidays are prime targets.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I’ve been living there for almost four years now. I know how to get around.”

“Keep your eyes open.”

“I will.”

“We trust you, Marlon,” says his mom, wiping away her tears. “I can’t help it, I’m sorry.”

Marlon gives his mother a second hug. "I'll be back soon again," he says with an uplifting smile. Seeing his mother cry makes Marlon sad, but he's not the one to break down anymore. Controlling his external emotions has become one of his best newfound strengths.

"You should go," says his father. "You don't want to miss your flight."

Marlon grabs his luggage and waves a last goodbye. As he turns around and heads towards the security line, his feelings are mixed. He can't tell whether he is going home or leaving home, or whether it makes any difference.

During his last semester in high school, Marlon knew that he had to leave. He wanted to go somewhere far away. That's when he decided to go to Europe.

He used his merits from the swimming team to get enrolled at a school located some twenty miles outside of London. It was a reputable school with plenty of opportunities to study abroad.

Marlon spent the first two years studying at the school's local campus and the third year at a business school in the northern Netherlands. Then he returned to London to write his thesis and intern at a small consulting firm. The four years had been a fast-paced journey of interacting with people from all over the world. He loved it and knew that he wanted more.

Marlon's experience definitely set him up for his role at Atlas Analytica. Every day he is forced to deal with multiple languages and cultures. He is not an expert in any of them, but he has developed tactical skills he didn't think

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he needed before. Sure, sometimes he despises the slow and chaotic process that comes with a diverse context. But instead of letting it get under his skin, he has learned to turn it into an advantage. The key, he has figured out, is as simple as that. Never let anyone get under your skin. Early on, LaFontaine taught him that emotional reaction is a sign of weakness, whereas emotional action is a sign of strength. Contexts with cultural heterogeneity are more likely to be emotionally intense. And when language falls short, they can even resort to being somewhat primitive. That's when you need to figure out which is which, and not mistake thin skin for thick. It's the kind of emotional intelligence that all creatures of the jungle adhere to. The type of knowledge that will keep you alive.

A female voice echoes from the gate's speaker system. "Mr. Renner, on flight AF333 to Paris Charles de Gaulle, can you please approach the check-in desk."

Marlon stands up and grabs his luggage. The message is repeated in French. He looks over at the check-in desk and sees a young, dark-blond woman wearing a fitting blue suit, who is speaking into a handset. He checks her out as he walks up to her. She is pretty, he thinks. She looks to be around his age.

"I'm Marlon Renner," he says.

"Boarding pass and passport please."

"Is there a problem?"

"Not at all," she says and scans his boarding pass. "We need to rearrange a few seats due to updates in the passenger list. Since you are a priority member, I would be

happy to upgrade you to an economy premium seat, free of charge.” She looks up at him and smiles. “If that’s okay with you, of course.”

“Is it next to the aisle?” he asks.

She looks down on her computer. “Yes,” she answers.

“Then I don’t know,” he says.

“No?” she asks, somewhat surprised.

“Do you have something else?”

“Let me see,” she says.

Marlon knows better than to accept the first best option. Especially when he has the upper hand.

“I have a seat in business class, but it’s also next to the aisle,” she says.

“I guess the extra leg room evens things out,” he says while keeping a firm face.

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he says.

“Because your original seat was also next to the aisle. You preselected it before checking in.”

Marlon feels his chest heating up.

“But I’m sure you already knew that,” she says, looking at him with an icy stare. “If you want something, ask for it. Don’t play games.”

Marlon feels like he’s ten years old, waiting for the woman to call for his mum over the speaker system. He bites his jaws to force his facial muscles in check.

The young woman’s face softens. She leans forward. “Or next time,” she says, “slip some money inside your passport, and I’ll know what to do.”

Marlon stares into her eyes. She can’t be serious, he thinks.

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The next moment, her eyes glisten, and her white teeth turn into a wide smile. "I'm kidding. Never do that," she says and prints him a new boarding pass. "Remember, I do this all day."

Marlon mirrors her smile.

"Are you going to Paris for business?" she asks.

"I live there," says Marlon.

"Paris is okay, but I live in Nice."

"Where are you celebrating New Year's Eve?"

"In Paris," she says and looks away while touching her cheek with her left hand, flaunting her engagement ring.

"Of course," says Marlon and gives her a friendly smile.

"Let's hope we arrive there in time."

"Don't worry," she says. "There's plenty of champagne on the plane."

Marlon first heard of Atlas Analytica when he saw an online interview with Pat LaFontaine, the company's founder. In the interview, LaFontaine said that he had developed a tool which would curl the toes of any man or woman working in the fields of marketing or public relations. He didn't offer any details but explained that Atlas Analytica was on the path of changing the world of communication as we knew it. At the time, Marlon was one month away from graduation, and LaFontaine's statement sounded both intriguing and inspiring. Within three hours of seeing the interview, Marlon had sent Atlas Analytica an open application. Two months later, he was hired as a Development Associate with the mission to develop the company's business across Europe. Although

he had little understanding of what that meant at the time, he was eager to find out.

Atlas Analytica is in the business of persuasion. The company's core idea is that effective persuasion is achieved by connecting to a person's underlying emotions. And since our underlying emotions are driven by our unique personality traits, finding this information has become the company's ultimate goal. The holy grail.

To map out an individual's personality traits, Atlas Analytica uses a psychometric model known as the Big Five. The Big Five model quantifies an individual's openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The results help explain what a person cares about, what drives their decision-making, and why they behave the way they do. Basically, they help you understand a person's needs and fears. Once you have this information, you have the ultimate recipe on how to formulate a message that speaks to a person's heart.

In recent years, the use of psychometrics has grown in popularity. For instance, it is often applied in personality tests during recruitment sessions or in online questionnaires designed to return entertaining answers that you can share with your friends. What most people don't know is that many of these tests and questionnaires are managed by companies such as Atlas Analytica, either as the direct or secondary publisher or as an acquirer and processor of the data itself. This is usually no secret if you read through the terms of the agreement.

When Marlon joined Atlas Analytica, they had already spent five years vacuuming the internet for available

information on European citizens. They had developed multiple tactics on how to capitalize on people's likes, shares, and comments on different social media platforms. For instance, a person who frequently shared content marked with aggressive words scored low on agreeableness. And a person who read an article and clicked on a specific hyperlink scored high on curiosity. To say the least, the company's feedback loop of personal data was plentiful.

A few months in, Marlon realized that digital blueprints of European citizens are often legally available online, either through public registries or private third-party platforms. The more transparency the country promotes, the easier it gets. Once you know how to efficiently collect the data, you can easily cross-check and populate these blueprints with whatever information you like. Moreover, if you automate this process through an algorithm that tracks people's unique online signatures, such as emails, phone numbers, aliases, work titles, and more, you have a have system that can crawl the internet and update itself in real time.

All this makes Atlas Analytica's sales pitch rather simple. In essence, they help you to persuade someone into thinking or doing as you like.

For example, an environmental group looking to engage people against global warming would traditionally run a communications campaign based on fact-based arguments on why and how the public should get involved. A traditional campaign strategy would be to create tailored messages based on demographic differences such as age, ethnicity, salary, gender, et cetera. This type of personal information is readily available and often accurate. Yet if

the goal of the campaign is to change people's behavior—such as changing the way they live and consume certain products—it will most likely fall short. Demographics don't drive people's behavior. Emotions do.

Persuading people to change their deeply rooted routines, behaviors, and understanding of things is near to impossible without fully engaging with their deeper emotions on their individual level. Trying to achieve this by using demographics would be nothing more than a guessing game.

Atlas Analytica doesn't guess. Through its database, psychometric models, and intelligent algorithms, clients are able to take one campaign message and tweak it into thousands of alternative rhetorical examples that speak to specific personality types. An article can be tweaked by changing its headline, keywords, accompanying pictures, language, and even narrative style, before being distributed and displayed in front of the targeted person. Customized content has become the new norm and is often overlooked by unaware consumers who mostly consume their content through individual mobile screens. They usually don't know, and often don't care, how similar content and facts are being presented to their neighbors or friends.

As Atlas Analytica works within a digital and traceable landscape, it can identify different patterns and connections across groups and people as they occur in real time. In fact, that's the company's sweet spot. Through its technology, Atlas Analytica is able to tap into the most powerful tool used to popularize an idea. That is, the ability to monitor and influence crowds. By connecting like-minded people through specific and dynamic filters, it can quickly organize self-propelled movements where

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people engage and build traction for a particular cause, at a staggering speed. An idea presented through a single photo, article, or illustration can rapidly amass a crowd of enthusiasts who, within a very short timeframe, will find themselves organized as a greater organ of self-made influencers towards their immediate communities and circles of friends.

Although Atlas Analytica offers an attractive service, it is highly selective with its clients and prefers to keep a low public profile. And in contrast to its internet-savvy business model, it only markets itself through face-to-face meetings.

Marlon's first year at the company was all about learning the business. He ran between floors doing tedious market research, studying algorithms, and assisting on client calls.

At the beginning of his second year, his role evolved. He was sent out across Europe to establish new relationships with prospective clients. This meant he had to work himself into various organizations and hunt down the people who had the right ears to hear out their ideas. He met everyone, from intrigued CEOs to arrogant interns, and spent most of his weekdays shuttling between airports, offices, and hotels.

The second year had been a tough experience. Marlon often ended up being misunderstood or hitting a wall. One time, when meeting with a large media company in Helsinki, he was asked to wait inside a conference room while they called security. Marlon had to call LaFontaine to prove his employment with Atlas Analytica and the legitimacy of the business. Apparently, they thought Marlon was linked to a Russian intelligence scheme.

Luckily, LaFontaine clarified the issue and everything turned out well.

During his third year, Marlon continued his travels across Europe. That time around, his meetings bore more fruit. He helped create several new projects and brought in a healthy chunk of new business.

The past six months have followed the same pattern. At this point, Marlon knew what he was doing and could turn his brain on autopilot every second day. Initially, he found this to be a state of comfort. But over the last couple of months, he has started questioning what this was all leading up to in the end. It's always the same pitch, the same process, day in and day out. If this is all there is to it, he isn't sure how far he wants to continue down the path. He would welcome some sort of change, but he can't fully articulate what type of change he is seeking. And he can't tell what bothers him the most: his itch for change or not knowing what he wants.

5

Marlon lands at Charles de Gaulle Airport a few minutes past midnight. Having slept half of the flight, he is far from tired.

The airport stands empty and sleepy.

Marlon speeds through the passport control, picks up his luggage, and hurries outside to the taxi line. The weather is raw and chilly.

Half an hour from the airport, his cab turns onto Le Boulevard Périphérique, the circular road that surrounds the city of Paris and which practically and symbolically marks the border with the city's surrounding suburbs. Marlon leans back and looks out the window. The lit-up view of the city comforts him, and he feels like he is coming home.

Marlon remembers the first time he heard her sing. Her soft and tender voice. Her closed eyes. Her hand movements. Neta's beauty was more vibrating than anything Marlon had ever known. But it wasn't only about her looks and her voice. It was also her warmth, her laughter, her passion. It all seemed so genuine and real. To him, she was different and exciting. Despite her young age, there was something worldly about her.

Marlon would do anything to impress Neta. She was the reason his grades improved and why he continued to excel in his swimming.

Neta transferred to Marlon's school at the beginning of their sophomore year. She and her family had moved out there from Los Angeles. She lived together with her mother and younger sister. Her father was still living out in California, but she hadn't seen him since she was ten. Neta's mother was from Iran, but she and her sister were born in the United States. At her house, her mother liked to tell them stories about her life in Iran before the revolution in 1979. She showed photos of herself when she was their age, pictures of her and her friends going to concerts and hanging out at the beach. Marlon always listened respectfully but never understood what the big deal was. They looked like any other teenager at the time, he thought. Everyone wearing vintage dresses and old-fashioned bathing suits.

He and Neta used any possible occasion to meet. She went to watch him swim, and he always turned up to listen to her sing. Marlon indulged in her mere existence and couldn't imagine a life without her by his side. She was his first experience of painful love.

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The summer before their senior year, they decided to move to California together. Marlon had been courted by the swimming teams at two different colleges out there, and Neta's good grades made her a likely prospect to enroll at both of them.

They sketched up their plans, and Marlon persuaded his father to sell him their old Ford Explorer at the end of the school year. Like that, he and Neta could use it to drive across the country together after graduation. The whole plan was more than beautiful.

In early November of that year, a friend from their school, Mike Ferraro, introduced Neta to a music producer in Atlanta. The introduction led to an audition, which resulted in an offer to record a single. Neta and Mike immediately flew down to Atlanta to put the project in motion. Unfortunately, after only two weeks, everything fell through, and the deal was off. Although the experience devastated Neta, it also pushed her to break new ground.

Mike, who was an ambitious promoter, encouraged her to start her own YouTube channel where she could sing and publish video diaries. She followed his suggestion, and the initiative became a success overnight. Soon, Mike also got involved, and their popularity as a duo rapidly began to scale from state to state. Long story short, two months into their last semester of high school, Neta and Marlon were no longer a couple.

The taxi stops in front of the 19th-century stone building in the city's 16th arrondissement, a wealthy neighborhood

that is known for its wide boulevards and many affluent homes.

Marlon's flat is a one-bedroom studio located on building's sixth floor. In the old days, the top floor housed the building's maids and servants. Nowadays, many of these spaces have been rebuilt into modern studios for students or young professionals, like Marlon.

Marlon likes his flat. It's calm, central, and only five metro stops away from his office. He moved there after spending his first six months in the Marais district on the other side of the city. Over there, he rented a room in an apartment owned by a Danish expat named Mads. Marlon and Mads had made great roommates. But when Mads moved back to Copenhagen, Marlon preferred to look for a place of his own.

"Fifty-seven euros," says the driver.

Usually, it's less, thinks Marlon. Then he remembers that it's New Year's Eve. He hands the driver three twenty-euro bills. "Keep the change, but I need a receipt," he says.

"Thank you very much!" says the driver.

It's funny, thinks Marlon. Back in the states, tipping three bucks would have made me a cheapskate.

Marlon stands still on the empty sidewalk. He observes the car's red taillights disappear down the quiet street and its cloudy fumes vanish in the cold air. He stands in silence for a few seconds before he picks up his bags and looks up at his building. Most of the windows are dark except for the grand apartment on the second floor. That's where Mr. Dreyfus lives. Marlon smiles to himself and enters through the front gate. It's nice to be back, he thinks.

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Yonatan Dreyfus is a vivid man in his late seventies. He always wears a thick burgundy-red bathrobe over his clothes, no matter what the season is. Mr. Dreyfus is the only neighbor Marlon ever talks to, partly because he is the owner of Marlon's flat and partly because he likes to speak English.

Mr. Dreyfus lives by himself in an impressive seven-piece apartment. The place is filled with tall bookshelves and large oil paintings. He doesn't own a phone, not to mention a computer. He makes all his calls from the landline inside the local bar down their street, called *Le Coq Fumant*. Sometimes, a slender, dark-skinned woman named Dominique stays in his apartment. Dominique looks to be half Mr. Dreyfus's age. Marlon isn't sure about their relationship, and he has never dared to ask. It is none of his business.

When Marlon enters his flat on the sixth floor, it stands hollow and cold. Fortunately, there's no rush to unpack. All his clothes are clean, and he didn't bring any suits.

He places his bags next to the closet and walks straight to the kitchen and opens the fridge. The inside shelves empty except for a jar of raspberry jam and a bottle of beer. *Why did I open it?* he asks himself. He already knew what was inside.

He looks at his watch, and it's past 1 AM. The brasserie down at Place du Trocadéro closes at two, he thinks. It's only ten minutes away. He shuts the fridge and heads out the door.

Moments later, he walks down Avenue Georges Mandel. Two cheerful couples pass him on the sidewalk. He figures that they are either returning home from a party or are on

their way to the next one. He pulls out his phone to text Mario, his colleague and closest friend living in Paris. Mario is probably in Milan, he thinks, but it's worth a shot.

Mario started working for Atlas Analytica at the same time as Marlon. The company had hired eight graduates that summer, but only Marlon and Mario remained. Among the others, four had been let go, and two had been hired by their clients. Marlon and Mario had found each other from the start. Neither of them was French, and they seemed to understand each other's situation. Since last year, Mario has begun to spend more time in Milan. That's where his girlfriend lives. Marlon figures that it might be a sign that Mario is finally thinking of returning home.

As Marlon reaches the end of the avenue, a black Volkswagen Polo speeds past him. The car brakes some fifty yards ahead and parks alongside the road. Five youngsters in their late teens step out of the car. All are dressed in tracksuits with small bags strapped across their shoulders. They have short-trimmed hair and North-African looks. The entire group's body language is erratic and anxious. Two of the guys stand out, talking in loud voices and visibly intoxicated. One of them opens the car's trunk, pulls out a large gym bag, and throws it on the hood.

Stuck between the road and a thirty-foot-high stone wall, Marlon stops to observe what the group is up to. He sees the guys reaching into the bag and pulling out several long, thin objects. Marlon steps behind a parked car and peeks over the roof, trying to identify the objects in their hands.

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The group leaves the car and begins walking towards Place du Trocadéro. As they walk under a streetlight, Marlon sees that they are carrying large firework rockets. Three to four pieces each. Marlon is pretty sure that shooting fireworks inside the city of Paris is illegal. *Whatever*, he thinks. There is nothing he can do about that. He steps back up on the sidewalk and continues walking ahead.

A short moment later, a dark-blue Renault drives past him and parks behind the black Polo. Three men step out. They are all young, well-built, have short hair, and wear comfortable shoes.

The three men walk up to the black Polo and look through the windows. One of them opens the front door—it's unlocked—and says something into a mobile transceiver.

These guys must be cops, thinks Marlon.

The three men start following the youngsters by foot.

Marlon decides to cross to the other side of the street. As he does, he sees a police car appearing in front of the youngsters. The youngsters quickly disappear behind a parked car.

Seconds later, a loud whistling sound swishes through the air, followed by a boom and a colorful explosion right in front of the police car.

The firework assault is repeated. Again and again.

Marlon takes cover behind a parked van and sees the three men charging towards the youngsters, attacking them from the rear.

The youngsters notice the ambush and take flight straight ahead.

The police car drives up on the sidewalk to block their way.

Two of the five youngsters are trapped. The three men single in on the weakest targets and throw themselves over them, brutally pushing them to the ground and handcuffing their hands behind their backs.

Marlon sees the other three youngsters disappearing down the street.

Another police car arrives at the scene. The two handcuffed youngsters are placed inside and driven away.

The three men walk back to the dark-blue Renault, and the remaining police car parks next to the black Polo.

The short moment of chaos has passed, and the street has returned to calm.

Marlon prepares himself to leave a witness statement by replaying the event in his head.

The dark-blue Renault takes off, and the other policemen remain seated in their police car.

An older couple walks past Marlon and the man meets his eyes.

"Tomorrow, they will have Kalashnikovs," says the old man and shakes his head.

Marlon responds with a nod.

He looks towards the policemen still seated inside their car. They probably don't need any witnesses, he thinks, and continues walking.

When Marlon arrives inside the restaurant, he receives a text from Mario, who confirms that he is in Milan.

Marlon orders an entrecôte with fries.

"It's too late for that," says the waiter. "We can make you a Croque-monsieur."

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“Sure,” says Marlon and adds a glass of red wine from Saint-Émilion.

The room is nearly empty. Of course, thinks Marlon. It’s not exactly the place where you celebrate New Year’s Eve.

He eats his meal in peace, thinking about the youngsters who were handcuffed. They probably don’t give a damn, he thinks. They have no respect for the system anyway.

After finishing his meal, he feels tired. He looks at his watch, and it’s almost 2 AM. He decides to head back to his flat and try to get some sleep.

He pays, collects his receipt, and walks out under the clear black sky. He looks across the street towards the lavish Palais de Chaillot. Its broad esplanade ends with a large terrace, offering a panoramic view of the Eiffel Tower and the entire city of Paris.

All this beauty in his own backstreet, he thinks. He puts his hands in his pockets and walks across the street and all the way out on the terrace.

A handful of couples and a small group of friends are passing around a bottle of wine.

At this hour, the city’s buildings are dark. Most people have withdrawn to the city’s colorful nightclubs, hidden cocktail bars, or warm Parisian nests. It’s a vulnerable time of the day, thinks Marlon. A time when woke minds tend to tilt to either darkness or joy. Although Marlon is alone, he doesn’t feel lonely. The first years in London, he had yearned for physical and emotional proximity. Not anymore. Now, he prefers to be strong alone rather than weak with someone else.

A young guy comes up next to Marlon, looking to be in his early twenties. “Do you have a lighter?” asks the young guy.

“Sorry, I don’t smoke.”

“Do you know of any good bars or clubs around here? We’re from Brussels.”

Marlon looks over at the guy’s friends. They look like students, he thinks. “Sure, there are plenty of places,” he says. “What are you looking for?”

“Anything with a bar,” says the guy. His friends concur, with laughter in the background.

“You should go to Grands Boulevards. There are plenty of bars around that area. It’s less than fifteen minutes away if you take a cab.”

“What about Champs-Élysées?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” says Marlon. “Especially not on New Year’s Eve. It’s overcrowded and overpriced. Trust me, go to Grands Boulevards and work your way from there.”

A distant and dampened sound echoes from the direction below the terrace. It appears to come from a couple hundred yards away, among the trees. The dampened sound is followed by a muffled, cracking noise that repeats itself for a few seconds.

“What’s that?” asks the guy while leaning out over the thick stone railing to have a look.

Marlon scans the area below the terrace without seeing anything noticeable. “I don’t know,” he says. “I saw some guys with fireworks earlier. It could be that.”

“Sweet,” says the guy and hands over his smartphone to Marlon. “Can you tap in the address of that place you mentioned? I’m ordering an Über.”

“Sure,” says Marlon, taking the phone.

The cracking noise starts popping off again. This time it’s louder and more aggressive. A man wearing a black cap

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comes up next to Marlon to have a look. "What's going on?" he says with an accent.

"Firecrackers," says the Belgian guy.

The cracking noise is repeated, and distant screams emerge from among the trees. Marlon looks over the railing again. He sees a group of people between the trees, moving towards the stone stairs leading up to the terrace.

"That's no firecrackers," says the man wearing the black cap. "That sounds like an automatic rifle." The man turns around, grabs the hand of his girlfriend, and starts moving away up the esplanade.

The Belgian guy smiles nervously. "Was he serious?"

"I don't know," says Marlon and gives back the phone. He looks at the people approaching them up the stairs. No one appears injured. They are young, well dressed, and don't wear any overcoats.

The tail of people continues to stack up behind them.

"What's going on?" Marlon shouts to a tall guy speeding ahead of everyone else up the stairs.

"Just run," the tall guy yells back.

Marlon hears another dampened explosion and realizes what must be going on. He starts moving with the crowd off the esplanade and towards Place du Trocadéro. More people crowd up behind him, collectively gasping for air as they catch their breath.

As Marlon crosses the street, a man nearby falls on his kneecaps, causing another man to trip and fall head-first to the ground, smacking his right cheek against the cold cement street. Marlon stops but is immediately pushed in his back and encouraged to move forward. Keeping his head turned backward, he sees two men grabbing on to the fallen guy's arm, trying to drag him back up to his feet.

From Place du Trocadéro, the crowd splits in different directions. Marlon continues up along Avenue Georges Mandel and towards his apartment. After a hundred yards, he stops behind a parked car to catch his breath. A few people continue running past him while others have started to walk. Most people have their phones in their hands or against their ears.

Marlon hears a loud cry next to him along the sidewalk. He looks over and sees a young woman wearing a black sleeveless dress, searching frenetically inside her bag. The young woman is barefoot, standing with dirty feet on the cold pavement. Marlon walks up to her and takes off his coat.

“Take this,” he says and wraps the coat around her shoulders.

As soon as the textile of his coat touches the woman’s bare skin, she shakes it off and lets it fall to the ground.

“I’m trying to help you,” says Marlon.

“I can’t find my phone,” the young woman cries. “I need to know where he is.”

Marlon pulls out his phone and hands it to her. “Here, use mine,” he says.

The young woman takes his phone, taps in a number, and puts it to her ear.

Marlon hears the signals through the speaker. He looks into the young woman’s eyes, which reflect a passive state of hopeful anticipation.

Marlon is quiet, waiting to hear someone answering her call.

As the seconds pass, the woman’s expression evolves into a tormented grimace of panic. When a voice machine

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answers her call, Marlon can feel the woman's fear deep in his own bones.

"Pauline," a female voice yells behind them.

Marlon turns around and sees another woman running up to them. She embraces the young, barefoot woman, who is now in a state of shock. Marlon takes back his phone and puts on his coat. He thinks about the guy who fell facedown on the street. He pictures him lying helpless in the middle of the road, trying to crawl to safety.

He looks back down the avenue. A few people are still moving in his direction, but he can't hear any sounds resembling gunshots. He only hears voices and distant sirens.

He looks at people's faces, trying to detect if someone is injured. Most seem unharmed.

Marlon starts running back towards the scene.

The farther he gets, the fewer people are around. When he reaches Place du Trocadéro, a ghostly silence filters through the air. The scene is empty, and no bodies are lying in the streets. Marlon stops to a still, his warm breath steaming into the cold air. It's too calm, he thinks. He feels an uncomfortable feeling attacking his gut, telling him that he is at the wrong place at the wrong time.

A helicopter hovers overhead. A bright searchlight is directed against the ground. Sirens emerge from every direction. A group of armed, dark-dressed men runs across the esplanade and towards the end of the terrace. Marlon's heart jumps up his throat.

"You," a loud voice screams at him. "Get out of here. Now!"

Marlon instantly turns around and starts running.

6

The media labeled it “Terror at Trocadéro.” Seven terrorists had stormed the nightclub, murdering 130 people and injuring 368.

None of the terrorists were still alive.

“Why did you go back?”

“I wanted to help,” says Marlon.

“It’s important that you listen to the police.”

“I did.”

The investigator takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes.

“And you were alone, you said?”

“Yes.”

“On New Year’s Eve?”

“I told you, I just came back from the airport.”

“Right.”

“Did they have anything to do with it?” asks Marlon.

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“Who?”

“The youngsters with the fireworks.”

“Forget about them. We know who they are. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

The investigator hands back Marlon’s passport. “Call us if you forgot anything, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You can go now.”

Marlon walks out of the small interrogation room. As he exits the police station, he feels his fatigued body catching up to his mind. He didn’t sleep at all last night. After returning to his flat, he had contacted his parents to reassure them that he was safe. He didn’t tell them where he had been during the attack. It would only exaggerate their worries, he thought. Instead, he had called Mario to vent. They talked for an hour. He’d thought about calling Billy too, but he didn’t. He’d sent him an email instead.

Early this morning, he called the police. He wanted to share what he had seen the night before. He figured it would help. To his surprise, police interest appeared mild. It seemed like they already knew everything they needed to know.

On his way home from the police station, Marlon stopped at the small grocery store next to his metro stop. He walked through the small shop and picked things off the shelves on routine. Every time he shops there, he can almost hear his father complaining about the premium price tags. But not today. Today nobody cares about the price tags.

Back at his flat, he breaks off a piece of bread and eats it with a slice of ham. He sits down on his bed where the

covers remain untouched. He checks the time. It's five in the afternoon. He should stay up for a couple more hours. He lies down on his back. *Only for a few minutes*, he thinks. Then he will prepare food. Within seconds, his exhaustion swallows him up in a single gulp, and he falls asleep.

Twelve hours later, Marlon slowly opens his eyes. The room is dark and quiet. He feels heavy but rested.

He sits up and takes a moment to track his thoughts. He thinks about the young, barefoot woman and whether she ever found who she was looking for. He picks up his phone and scrolls to the number she had dialed. He looks at it for few a seconds. *Do I even want to know?* he asks himself. *What difference would it make?*

He gets up and opens the windows to his small balcony. He takes a few deep breaths and lets the cold air fill his lungs and tighten his skin. *Get a grip*, he tells himself. He throws his phone on the bed and starts preparing for work.

Shortly after, Marlon walks through the anonymous lobby at Atlas Analytica. He takes the elevator up to the fifth floor and steps out on the quiet, gray, wall-to-wall carpeting. Twenty empty desks are lined up side-by-side in rows of four, with a walking path in the middle. There is a wall of windows, two conference rooms, and one office. The office belongs to David Marron, Marlon's manager. David is the only person between Marlon and LaFontaine. David joined the company last year and is an avid subscriber of prestigious management magazines.

The day Marlon joined the company, there were only five desks on the fifth floor, and there were fifty employees in

total. Today, they have two hundred employees and make ten times the revenue.

The fifth floor is where the marketing and client development teams sit. They are the ones speaking with clients and cultivating the business. The second, third, and fourth floors are for the research & development teams. They are a group of data scientist, psychologists, and software engineers. Those are the guys who manage the company's database and design all the algorithms. The sixth floor is for administration, and the seventh floor is the territory of LaFontaine.

As Marlon walks towards his desk in the back, motion detectors pace his movement and light up the room.

He docks his laptop at his desk and walks over to the Nespresso machine. While the scent of coffee fills the air, Marlon leans against the window. It's still dark outside. The wet pavement is gleaming from the streetlamps.

Marlon's phone vibrates. He has received an email from Billy.

He grabs his coffee and walks back to his desk.

Billy writes, "I'm glad everything turned out okay." Other than that, he doesn't offer much reflection. Billy's casual tone makes Marlon feel somewhat weird. Almost offended. Doesn't he realize what has happened?

Marlon tries to put himself in Billy's shoes. Fair enough, he thinks. Billy is probably busy with his own problems right now. What's more, it must be hard to grasp the situation from a place so far away, especially when you are in a place where you have never been before.

"Hi there," says a soft female voice. "Jetlagged?"

Marlon looks up and sees Isabelle walking towards him with an uplifting smile.

Isabelle works on the same floor. She is French and about Marlon's age.

Marlon likes Isabelle. She is bright, caring, and a good friend. And, like him, she discreetly rolls her eyes every time David decides to use another washed-out corporate cliché.

"A bit," says Marlon. "I woke up early."

"Me too."

They greet each other with two light cheek kisses.

"Did you know him?" she asks.

"Who?"

"Paul," she says. "I think he was quite new. Worked on the second floor."

Marlon knows most of the guys on the second floor. But he struggles to keep track of all the new names.

"What about him?" asks Marlon.

"Oh, you haven't read the email yet?"

Marlon opens his work email. There it is. An email from Human Resources informing everyone that their colleague Paul Dupont was a casualty in the recent terrorist attack. It also says that the whole company will gather in the lobby at noon. The government has declared a nationwide minute of silence.

Marlon opens up the company registry and searches for Paul's photo. "I recognize his face, but I don't remember ever talking to him," he says.

"Same for me," says Isabelle.

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Only that he was twenty-three years old and started working here during the fall. He was probably fresh from school."

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Marlon leans back in his chair. "I was there," he says. "Not in the club, but up at Palais de Chaillot. I was returning home after eating a late dinner."

Isabelle sits down on his desk. "Seriously?"

"I know," he says. "It's surreal. I still don't get it."

Marlon tells Isabelle about his experience.

While listening to himself and seeing Paul's photo on the screen, an uncomfortable feeling travels up his back. He begins having inexplicable feelings of guilt. *What did I do to help?*

"Where were you?" he asks Isabelle.

"I was at home with my boyfriend. We were already in bed, and I didn't hear about it until the next day. I couldn't believe it was true."

The elevator doors open and a handful of their colleagues enter the room.

"Do me a favor," says Marlon to Isabelle. "Don't tell anyone I was there. I don't feel like retelling it the whole day. You see what I mean?"

"Of course, no problem."

Typically, on any given day, less than half of the desks are occupied on the fifth floor. Most staff are out on the road. Today, however, being the first working day of the new year, everyone is scheduled for some face time at the office.

Marlon spends the rest of the morning catching up with his colleagues. When Mario arrives, he takes him to the side tells him what he had told Isabelle. Mario understands.

"Have you seen the videos?" yells Xavier from the other side of the room.

"Which videos?" Mario yells back.

"The ones on YouTube," yells Xavier. "Where you can see how it looked inside the club."

Mario turns around. "Have you seen this, Marlon?"

"I'm watching it right now."

"Do you remember when we went there?"

"Yes, it was last June during Roland-Garros, right?"

"Right," says Mario. "I remember the fish tanks."

"Me too."

"Six hundred thousand liters of water," yells Xavier.

That's roughly one-hundred-sixty-thousand gallons, Marlon recalculates in his mind. *That's weird*, he thinks. None of the people running away from the nightclub had been wet. The terrorists must have begun with the shooting, he thinks. Then they blew up the tanks.

He tries to remember the night when he and Mario went to that same club. They had attended Roland-Garros, the tennis tournament, during the day and arrived at the club around midnight. Marlon remembers being sunburned but happily intoxicated. He also recalls standing hypnotized in front of one of the fish tanks, pledging to himself to go scuba diving someday soon.

Marlon looks out the window.

Then he types 'Neta' into the search bar. Her and Mike's channel comes up at the top of the page.

"Guys, it's five minutes to noon," says Isabelle. "We should head down to the lobby."

Marlon turns off his computer.

A few minutes later, the whole office has gathered down in the lobby. The small space is overcrowded, and people are lined up against the walls.

Last time the whole company gathered like this was when Russia invaded the Crimean peninsula of Ukraine,

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remembers Marlon. LaFontaine had held an impromptu speech, encouraging everyone to scrutinize the ongoing event. “Recognize the patterns,” LaFontaine had said. “This is PR history in the making. Learn from it.”

On a table next to the reception desk is a framed photo of Paul—the same photo as in the company registry. Next to the frame lays a notebook and a bouquet of flowers.

Marlon and Isabelle line up against the wall with their shoulders squeezed against each other.

Marlon observes two young guys with tears in their eyes standing next to Paul’s photo. Marlon recognizes their faces but can’t remember their names. They must be new, he thinks. Probably hired in the same round as Paul.

LaFontaine exits the elevator and points at his watch. It’s noon.

The room gets quiet, and most bow their heads. Some cars come to a stop outside.

Marlon feels Isabelle’s shoulder weakening, revealing her vulnerability with a few tiny twitches. He wants to put his arm around her to comfort her.

When the silent minute comes to an end, LaFontaine jumps up on the reception desk. He stands still for a moment, looking down to the ground before he looks up and clears his throat. “On the first day of this year, our colleague and friend Paul Dupont was taken from us. I have contacted Paul’s parents and told them that we, the whole company, are thinking of them. I said that we are here to support them if they need anything. We have also contacted a crisis expert if any of you want to talk to a professional. Beatrice will send information about that this afternoon.”

Beatrice, who stands next to the reception desk, makes herself visible by standing up on her toes. It looks like she has aged ten years since the day he started here, thinks Marlon. He has barely talked to Beatrice since that day. Every time he sees her, she looks like she is late for a meeting, close to tears, carrying a pile of folders in her arms.

“Yesterday I felt angry and disgusted,” says LaFontaine. “I felt afraid for my children, my family, my friends. After so many attacks, I asked myself: is this the new normal? And if it is, what’s next?”

LaFontaine gets quiet. He takes a few steps along the reception desk, his left hand stroking his chin.

“Fear, anger, disgust. They are all primary emotions,” he says. “They are strong and rooted emotions, the type of emotions that tell us something is wrong, the type of emotions that persuade us to either act or remain passive and hope for the best. In most situations, our decisions are determined not by logic and pragmatism, but by temperament and passion. You can’t blame yourself. We are emotional beings. It’s the way we are wired. Nobody can change that.”

LaFontaine pauses to underscore his point.

“We all know that what happened this weekend does not reflect the society we want to live in,” he says. “Your feelings of fear, anger, and disgust are a natural reflection that something is wrong. And some of you may seek methods to suppress those feelings.”

LaFontaine seeks the eyes of his audience.

“The way forward is not to suppress our emotions. It is to identify them, explore them, and understand them. This is how you learn about yourself and your connections with

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other people. Embrace them. Challenge your thoughts, and evolve your perspective. Remember, for every subject there exists a different perspective for each man. To handle that truth you need to be brave. Always be brave. Preserving peace is a constant war. And war is won by courage. So if you strive for peace of mind, build the courage to speak your mind. That's the concept of freedom of speech. Remember that. Freedom of speech isn't only reserved for politically correct ideas. It's dirty and uncomfortable. It's a tool for the brave. And only the brave will ever find peace."

Marlon looks around and sees many of his colleagues nodding their heads in agreement. He then observes LaFontaine, who has his eyes locked on the windows facing the street. His stillness reveals that he is caught up in his own thoughts, and he has everyone in the room waiting.

After a few seconds, LaFontaine begins to slowly nod his head as if he agrees with his own thoughts. "Alright," he says, "Beatrice will send you more information this afternoon. Thank you."

The crowd quietly dissolves.

Later that afternoon, back on the fifth floor, David calls Marlon into his office.

As Marlon sits down in the chair opposite David's desk, he notices a new photo standing next to the computer. It's a photo of David's ex-wife and three daughters. The whole family is standing on a rocky beach, sporting tanned bodies and white smiles. It's a beautiful photo. The perfect family vacation, it seems.

Marlon met David's then-wife during a company barbeque last summer. It was only a few weeks later when

he heard about their divorce. *Maybe the photo means that they are back together?*

"I reviewed your targets for this year," says David.

"Alright."

"I have some ideas. Some stuff I think we should improve."

"Sounds good."

"Did you install the new video-conference tool?"

"I did."

"It's part of our new streamlining strategy. It's going to be a—"

David is interrupted by a knock on the door.

Without David's permission to enter, the person outside opens the door.

"Rita," says David, visibly annoyed. "How can I help you?"

"Sorry to bother you," says Rita. "I was looking for Marlon." Rita turns to Marlon. "Pat wants to see you upstairs."

"Can it wait?" asks David.

"He said that it's urgent," says Rita. "You can call him if you want."

David picks up his phone and dials up LaFontaine. "Hi, Pat, it's David. Rita says that you want to see Marlon. Can it wait? We just sat down for a meeting."

David looks down at his desk, showcasing an increasingly bulging vein on the side of his forehead.

"Sure, no problem," he says. "He'll be right up."

"Should I bring anything?" Marlon asks Rita.

"No, just you."

Marlon leaves David's office and follows Rita up the elevator to the seventh floor.

7

LaFontaine's office hasn't changed much since Marlon's first visit. Except for the addition of a large and heavy meeting table that matches his thick wooden desk. Rumor has it that it was too big for the elevator and had to be brought in through the window.

"Marlon," says LaFontaine, and he stands up behind his desk. "Thank you, Rita."

Rita gives Marlon a reassuring smile before leaving the room.

LaFontaine walks up to Marlon and shakes his hand. "Did you eat lunch?"

"Yes, sure," answers Marlon. "Did you?"

"Didn't have much of an appetite today but, yes, I did. Let's sit down over here," says LaFontaine as he walks over to the large meeting table. He pulls out a chair for

Marlon at the corner and sits down next to him. "How's the ambiance down there?"

"It's quite somber," says Marlon.

"Did you know Paul? Did you hang out outside of work?"

"No," says Marlon. "Unfortunately not."

"I'm going to the funeral in Lyon. Victor and Nathan are going too. The three of them were close. We hired them the same week."

Now Marlon remembers. Victor and Nathan were the two guys standing next to Paul's photo.

"Past weekend aside," says LaFontaine. "It's been three and a half years now, right?"

"That's right," says Marlon.

"This is usually a threshold moment in one's career. A time when you start thinking, *What the heck have I gotten myself into?* And whether it makes sense to continue down the same path."

Marlon is hit by the uncanny accuracy of LaFontaine's words. "I guess you're right," he says.

"So have you figured out what the heck you've gotten yourself into?" LaFontaine chuckles.

"Truth be told," says Marlon, "I still don't have a clue."

They both laugh.

"You are a smart kid, Marlon. Well wired. And you've managed to evolve into a dealmaker. That takes a lot of courage."

The right corner of Marlon's mouth curves up slightly as if he wants to smile.

"We may not speak much," says LaFontaine, "but I keep scores on all of you. Unfortunately, most of my time is

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spent putting out fires rather than lighting new ones, if you know what I mean.”

Marlon nods.

“You remember what I told you when I hired you, right?”

“Sure I do.”

“I’m not the kind of general who lets his best soldiers meander around in the same shoes four years in a row. It’s time for a change, wouldn’t you agree?”

Marlon looks curiously at LaFontaine. *It’s like he’s reading my mind*, Marlon thinks. “What kind of shoes do you have in mind?” he asks.

“I want to open a new office in Australia, probably Sydney. First, I need someone to go over there and get a feel for the place. Check out the players and meet the locals, so to speak.”

Marlon has never been to Australia. In fact, he knows nothing about it. “Why Australia?” he asks.

“Why not?”

“What about our expansion here in Europe?”

“We’ve figured out a good model. A functioning, international model. It’s time to capitalize worldwide before the copycats catch up on us.”

“Of course,” says Marlon.

“I think we need about three to six months of proper boots-on-the-ground investigation to build a solid case.”

“What’s the timeframe?”

“I want this in motion before the summer. The sooner, the better.”

“Is it official? I mean, can we talk about it?”

“For now, keep it to yourself,” says LaFontaine. “I will send you a report from a local advisor. I want your input.”

“Okay,” says Marlon. “I can do that.”

LaFontaine smiles and knocks his knuckles against the table. “Good,” he says. “In the meantime, there’s something else I want you to have a look at. Something more urgent.”

LaFontaine stands up and walks over to his desk. He brings back a two-page document that he hands to Marlon. “We got a new prospective project,” he says. “The topic has a political undertone, but it’s essentially an awareness campaign. I’ve had our lawyers scrutinize the details, and I’ve decided that we give it a go.”

Marlon skims through the document, which contains an analytical summary of the Greek economy. “I don’t understand,” he says. “Is the Greek government finally declaring bankruptcy, or what?”

“What you’re reading is a report made six months ago by a senior economist who, at that point, worked for the World Monetary Fund. The WMF, as you probably know, is one of the lenders to the Greek government. And, yes, the report basically concludes that the Greek government is going towards an inevitable bankruptcy. Despite all their current financial lifelines.”

“Is the analysis accurate?”

“Our lawyers have backtracked all the raw data to official and publicly available sources, and, yes, all the data checks out. Still, it’s a forecast. So you know.”

“Is this a public report?”

“It’s a bit complicated,” says LaFontaine. “At first, this was an internal report at the WMF, filed to be publicly available after executive approval. But after it had traveled across the desks of a few important people, it was buried far away from the public light. The economist who wrote

it, Dr. Isaac Paulsen, quit his job in protest. Then he tried to popularize his findings on his own but without any success.”

“Why is that?”

“Writing a blog post only takes you that far.”

“Right,” says Marlon. “He never cracked the algorithms.”

“Now,” says LaFontaine. “Paulsen has found a financial partner who is ready to back him with a proper communication campaign.”

“I get it,” says Marlon, placing the document on the table. “We spread this report like wildfire to convince the markets that Greece is defaulting on their debts. All while Paulsen and his partner position themselves for a quick financial win.”

“Maybe,” says LaFontaine. “But you’re missing the full picture. This is bigger than that.”

“Why?”

“The main forces keeping the Greek economy afloat are Eurozone politicians. They use taxpayer money to buy up the Greek debt, keeping it away from the free market. At least for now. Their motive is to save their own political legacies and maintain the value of their riches. All which is owned by themselves and their elite group of friends. You see what is happening here, right? The taxpayers are bailing out this entitled group of people without even knowing it. And every year the hole gets deeper and darker. Once the elites have tucked away their wealth, they will pull away the carpet, and it will all fall through. Heavy and hard.”

“But if Greece defaults on its debt, the whole Eurozone could collapse?”

“Well, if Paulsen’s analysis holds true, what’s the point of pushing it back?”

“So the pitch is to realize the losses before too much shit hits the fan?”

“Something like that,” says Lafontaine. “The main idea of Paulsen and his backers is to put pressure on Eurozone governments to pull the plug on Greece and let them default on their debts.”

“And they want us to mobilize this campaign?”

“Yes, they want to create pressure from the public domain. Hit the politicians where it hurts.”

“Sounds big,” says Marlon. “We’d probably be stepping on some important toes, no?”

“That’s the point,” says LaFontaine.

“Still, you called this an awareness campaign?”

“Sure, it’s a sensitive topic, but it’s not like we alone are powerful enough to send an entire country into bankruptcy.”

“That may be true,” says Marlon. “But we can certainly rock the boat a bit, don’t you think?”

“Exactly,” says LaFontaine. “That’s the main idea. We will simply help these guys to kick off a well-needed debate.”

Marlon nods.

LaFontaine leans back in his chair. “The signs are clear,” he says. “Innovation is stalling. Youth unemployment is at a record high. The public coffers are being ransacked by a small elite. And as history confirms, when resources start drying up, societies clash and heads start to roll. It’s time for a real debate to take place. For that to happen, a fundamental event must occur with real consequences attached. Calling the bluff on Greece once and for all is

our best chance of correcting the system in time. Don't you agree?"

"I do," says Marlon. "Debate is good."

"What happened this weekend is not an isolated event motivated by religious beliefs. Islam is merely the platform, like all ideologies challenging the status quo. The assailants were thugs, gangsters, born and bred in Europe. These trends are among a wider scope of trends. And all trace back to the same root cause of disbelief in the system and deteriorating values. It just happens to hit the periphery of the society before it reaches its core." LaFontaine leans forward. "It needs to stop before it goes too far. This is the type of project that needs our help."

Marlon gets what LaFontaine is trying to say. They both know that the topic is filled with a complex web of political backstories. But that's not their issue. If Paulsen's report is accurate, the public has the right to know. It's as simple as that. Anything else would be illegal.

"I get it," says Marlon. "Obviously, I'm on your side. If this report speaks the truth, let's get it out there. Let's stimulate the debate. What's the strategy?"

"Alright," says LaFontaine, rapping his knuckles against the table. "We are going to attack this from both sides of the fence. It means that we will push for a Greek exit from the Eurozone towards both people inside and outside of Greece. Since most media outlets won't touch this type of topic without widespread support, we will approach this from the ground up. We will plant seed themes through smaller media channels and let sub-debates grow organically. Then we light up the big fire."

"Makes sense," says Marlon. "Do we have any ideas for the initial themes?"

“Louis in R and D has worked out a set of themes for the pilot campaign. I’ll send them to you by email. All we need to do now is to write up the narratives and design the proposal for the client.”

“I’ll start screening for a writer,” says Marlon.

“No need for that. I’ve already found one.”

“Yeah?”

“My brother. He’s working as a journalist for the *Economic Times*. Or, until next week, that is. His name is Jacob Laroy, and he’s based in Berlin. I’ve tried to lure him over for years.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother working for the *Economic Times*.”

“Half-brother. Different fathers. We didn’t grow up together. Jacob was two years old when he moved away with his father. I was fifteen.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

“Jacob has always been a journalist, and, like me, he’s been moving around a lot. Toronto, London, Hong Kong, Moscow, and now Berlin. He’s a man of the world. You’re going to like him.”

“Sure.”

“But first things first. We still need to win the project.”

“Who’s the client?”

“It’s a consortium of investors that leads the project. I’m in contact with their main guy, and I will introduce you as soon as we’ve sent them the initial proposal. I’m not sure how many firms are competing for this, but I have a feeling that we are well positioned.”

“What’s the deal structure?”

“Off the radar,” says LaFontaine. “First of all, the client requires an internal confidentiality seal during the pilot

period. Except for you and Jacob, only Arielle and Louis from R and D will be involved. Not even David will know.”

Marlon nods. “Okay.”

“As for the legal deal structure, we will set up a separate corporation, owned by a string of offshore companies and ultimately a group of trustees. The separate corporation will sign a direct contract with the client, own the content, and then sign a license agreement attached to our database and distribution unit. It means that the client will have no direct contract with Atlas Analytica. Although everything is legit, the goal is, as always, to keep the company off the radar to avoid any unnecessary attention.”

“Got it,” says Marlon. “How do we get started?”

“You meet with Jacob and help him draft the first narratives to the initial themes. After that, Arielle and Louis will run the simulations through our database, and I will send the proposal to the client.”

“Is Jacob in Berlin right now?”

“No, he’s down in Athens. He has been there for a few weeks to report on the migrant situation. It’s his last assignment for the *Economic Times*.”

“When can we meet?”

“Jacob will join us officially as of next week, but he can make time to meet with you right way.”

“In Athens?”

“Yes, in the heart of the actual story.”

“Great,” says Marlon. “I can probably get down there by tomorrow.”

“Rita has already booked you a flight for tonight.” LaFontaine looks at his watch. “It leaves in three hours. I will send you and Jacob a file with all the information you

need to get started. I was hoping that we could have a first draft of the narratives ready by tomorrow night.”

“Alright,” says Marlon. “What do I say to David and the others?”

“This will be your sole priority for the moment. I will tell David that the client has requested a confidentiality seal. They all know the drill.” LaFontaine calls in Rita to his office. “Let him know the details,” he tells her.

“I’ve sent you the bookings for the flight and the hotel,” says Rita to Marlon. “Jacob will meet you at the hotel around nine thirty tonight. There is a car waiting for you outside. You’ll have time to make a quick stop at your place on your way to the airport. The driver is informed.”

“Thanks, Rita,” says LaFontaine and looks at Marlon. “If you need anything, you call Rita or me directly. Okay?”

“Got it,” says Marlon and stands up.

“And about Australia,” says LaFontaine. “I’d love to have you in on the ground floor. But take your time to review the file. It requires commitment.”

“I will,” says Marlon.

“Also,” says LaFontaine, “don’t let Jacob drag you out to a bar all night. We need to speed this thing up.”

Marlon follows Rita out of the office.

In the car, Marlon receives an email from LaFontaine with further information attached to the Greek project. It contains the full report from Mr. Paulsen, a note of assurance from their lawyers, and a list of campaign themes. Each campaign theme is pegged to a number of primary emotional instincts. The idea is for Marlon and Jacob to use the themes to write up suggested narratives to support the campaign goal. For instance, one of the themes is religion and covers the connection between the

Greek Church and its state finances. It's known that the Greek government has had a history of murky dealings with the Greek Church. This can be used as an attention-grabber to trigger disgust and discontent among many people within the Eurozone. For some people, it can even be a determining factor to demand that political leaders immediately cut off any further support to the Greek government. The information just needs to be designed and distributed in the right context and consumed by the appropriate eyes. Then, as more themes are added and connected with each other, the topic of Mr. Paulsen's report will start to gain traction with a broader public. And although most people will probably never read or understand Paulsen's actual report, they will still use it as a tool to support their cause.

For now, Marlon views the project with some reservation. He has seen this type of campaign initiated by a small interest group unfold before. They are usually a hard nut to crack. Especially if they lack a symbolic leader who can tie the whole campaign into a coherent action. He doesn't know Paulsen or who his partners are. Their profiles on paper hint that they might be a group of unknown men wearing ill-fitted suits and squared shoes. If that's true, it could be a tough sell to the skeptical Europeans.

The car stops outside Marlon's apartment. He is wearing a gray wool suit, a light blue shirt, leather-brown derby shoes, and a navy blue cashmere overcoat. Perhaps he is overdressed, he thinks, but there is no time to change. Rita has booked him a standby ticket, and he'll probably be back by tomorrow night. He throws his cabin bag on his bed and packs it with clean underwear, a new shirt, and a

pair of jeans. Inside is already has a pre-packed necessaire with a toothbrush, deodorant, cologne, face moisturizer, a razor, and a handful of q-tops. In less than two minutes, he is already back out of the door, heading downstairs to the car.

On his way to the airport, Marlon googles “Jacob Laroy.” He finds a brief bio on the website of the *Economic Times*. It outlines a long career in journalism spent as a foreign correspondent at a few well-known news outlets. He scans a handful of articles written by Jacob throughout the years. The topics mainly cover foreign politics and international business. He moreover finds a book available at Amazon authored by a Jacob Laroy and published ten years ago. The book is a novel and takes place during the Cold War. The story is described to be about a young Canadian reporter based in West Berlin who falls in love with a Russian woman living in Moscow. The book has no reviews and lacks a biography of its author. It must be the same Jacob, thinks Marlon. The coincidence is too obvious.

Other than that, Marlon is not able to find any social media accounts or visual photos with a clear link to Jacob’s name. Considering his role as a journalist, it’s probably intentional, he thinks.

8

Marlon arrives at Athens International Airport at eight o'clock in the evening. He has been here before.

A few years ago, Marlon was scheduled to meet with a communications executive at a Greek bank. But the moment his flight touched the ground, he was informed that the meeting was called off. The bank's entire executive team had been sacked during his flight from Paris. When Marlon called LaFontaine to share the news, he'd laughed and answered, "Seems like we are too late to the party. Come back home. We'll go back when they've sobered up."

After landing, Marlon moves quickly through the airport and straight to the taxi line.

The air is not as cold as back in Paris but still crisp and breezy.

An older, friendly-looking taxi driver helps him load his luggage into the car's trunk. Marlon sits down behind the passenger's seat and asks how long it will take them to get to the hotel.

"No rush. Only forty minutes," says the driver.

"I have an appointment at nine thirty."

"No problem. I'll get you there in time."

"Thanks."

"United States?" asks the driver.

"Yes, but I've been living in Europe for a while. France and the UK."

"My nephew lives in London."

"I used to study there," says Marlon. "It's a nice city."

"I have never been."

"You should visit him."

The driver chuckles. "The young don't want to stay in Greece," he says. "The old, like me, we have no choice."

They exchange looks in the rearview mirror. The driver has tired eyes.

"You speak good English," says Marlon.

"You know, I used to be an architect," says the driver. "These days, everyone does anything they can. It's different."

Marlon nods.

"First time in Greece?" asks the driver.

"Second time," says Marlon.

"Did you know," says the driver, "six years ago, two percent of the Greek people lived in extreme poverty. Today, it's fifteen percent." He looks at Marlon. "Fifteen percent," he repeats.

"That's a lot," says Marlon.

"Youth unemployment is forty-four percent."

“It’s not a good number.”

“Twenty-five percent of the population is retired. Did you know?”

Marlon shakes his head.

“And do you know what the plan is? The magic plan,” says the driver, looking back at Marlon again. “is to decrease pension payments.” The driver laughs. “My mother is retired. She gets three hundred euros a month. She worked her whole life as a teacher.”

Marlon doesn’t know what to answer.

“You know,” says the driver. “my daughter wants to be a teacher. She loves school. But I read the newspaper. Greek schoolteachers earn 650 euros per month these days. That’s before taxes. I tell my wife, I can’t do that to her. She will never be independent.”

“How old is your daughter?” asks Marlon.

“Thirteen. My only child.”

“My mum is a teacher,” says Marlon.

The car in front of them brakes hastily. The driver honks his horn. “You see,” he says and raises his hand. “People don’t care anymore.”

Marlon leans back in his seat, and lets the driver talk.

When they reach the city limits of Athens, they stop at a red light. Marlon sees a group of young people crossing the street. They are in their late twenties, well-dressed and look content. Ironically, he thinks, they don’t fit into the driver’s narrative at all.

They arrive at the hotel a few minutes to nine o’clock. It’s a nice hotel located in the city center. Not high-end but somewhere in the range of four to five stars. The company’s budget. Marlon shakes the driver’s hand and thanks him for the ride.

At the hotel's welcome desk, a young woman with curly dark-blond hair greets him with a friendly smile. After helping Marlon to check in, she hands him an envelope. "It's for you," she says.

Marlon opens it and pulls out a note that reads, 'At bar. Jacob.'

"Where is your bar?" asks Marlon.

"I'll show you," says the young woman and walks around the reception desk. "Follow me."

As she walks in front of him, one foot calmly in front of the other, he catches himself scanning her body from the neck down. He feels guilty and tries not to stare, but he can't help himself. When the scent of her perfume welcomes itself into his mind, it tingles all the way down to his knees. Either she has no idea, he thinks, or she has it all figured out.

The hotel bar stands in an open area with islands of leather armchairs spread across the floor. Large windows face a carefully lit up garden, creating a dark and subtle atmosphere inside. Marlon scans the room. Three elderly men lounging in the chairs, two middle-aged women next to the windows, and a middle-aged man sitting at the bar. The man at the bar is tapping on his phone and has a half-full glass of beer next to him. It must be Jacob, thinks Marlon, and approaches the bar. "Jacob?" he asks.

The man looks up at him. "You must be Marlon?"

Jacob has a somewhat bohemian look with an unshaven face and messy hair. He wears a green wrinkled tweed jacket, black t-shirt, washed-out jeans, and a pair of well-worn boots.

"Nice to meet you," says Marlon and shakes Jacob's hand.

Jacob has a relaxed face and kind eyes. He doesn't look much like LaFontaine, thinks Marlon.

"Did you eat dinner?" asks Jacob.

"I had some on the plane."

"That doesn't count. Let's grab a drink and get something to eat." Jacob finishes his beer and stands up.

Marlon asks the bartender for two more beers before they sit down at an empty corner of the room.

"Your brother told me you're doing a piece on the migrant situation down here?" says Marlon. "It must be a tricky one."

"This whole place is a circus," says Jacob. "You would think that people had realized that this is a third world country by now. But the Europhiles are busy romanticizing something that doesn't exist anymore."

"The taxi driver over here gave me quite a gloomy picture," says Marlon.

"It's a nice country, nice people, but the idea of letting them join the Eurozone was delusional. The Greeks don't want to be German, and the Germans don't want to be Greek. It's like a marriage built on lust—great wedding, great honeymoon, but a messy divorce."

Marlon laughs at the metaphor. "So you think that a divorce is forthcoming?"

"They have to do something at least. Any child from this marriage would run away from home at the first opportunity. Look around, and you'll see plenty of sad clowns. Then there are people like me who stand on the sidelines, writing stories and report back to the emperor."

"What's the story about?"

"You mean what I'm reporting on?"

"Right."

“Facts. The uncomfortable truth. The type of information which isn’t exactly in high demand anymore.”

Marlon sips his beer.

“I’m heading out to the island of Lesbos tomorrow morning,” says Jacob. “I’m filing my last article at the end of this week.”

“Afterward, you’re joining us fulltime, I heard?” says Marlon.

“That’s the plan, yes.”

“That’s great news. The company needs people like you. Real writers with real-world experience.”

“Yeah, you think so?” asks Jacob.

“Of course.”

Jacob tastes his beer. “So, I understand that we are supposed to draft some sort of pitch for the proposal.”

“Yes, that’s it,” says Marlon. “Did you read the file?”

“Sure, but I already knew about Paulsen’s report. My employer refused to make a big deal out of it. Like all the other newsrooms out there. That’s what persuaded me to finally leave.”

“What’s your opinion about the report, though?”

“Paulsen deserves to be heard. People need to understand how fucked up things truly are.”

“I agree,” says Marlon. “What time are you leaving for Lesbos tomorrow?”

“I fly out at eleven in the morning.”

“We should start right away, then.”

“Sure, tell me what we need to do.”

“At this stage,” says Marlon. “It’s all about clarity and simplicity. We want to show the client how we chop up the campaign’s objectives into multiple sub-themes. Themes that make sense on an individual level for ordinary

people. Our team has already picked out a set of themes to use in the initial phase. Now we need to write up narratives for each theme.”

“Hold on,” says Jacob. “What do you mean about narratives?”

“Stories,” says Marlon. “Fact-based stories that people find intriguing and interesting.”

“Alright,” says Jacob. “That means we rewrite Paulsen’s report into a language for the common man.”

“Kind of,” says Marlon. “But not really.”

“No?”

“As for now, we forget about Paulsen’s report. Our prime mission is to organize a crowd and figure out what gets them going.”

“Okay, but at the end of the day, the goal is to inform about the report, right?”

“Right. But the report is still too vulnerable. It can easily be talked down by the opposition. The key here is to push stories that cannot stand analysis. Then it’s impossible for the opposition to argue against you.”

“Like what?”

“Let me put it like this. If you show enough dying children, you can sway a whole population to go to war. Without a single fact-check.”

Jacob shrugs back. “That example doesn’t really apply here, does it?”

“It may be hard to admit, but it always applies,” says Marlon. “Moral judgment is more likely affected by crowd psychology than careful analysis. So if we want to achieve the goal of the campaign, we need to control the crowd. Simple as that.”

Jacob wrinkles his forehead and sips his beer.

Marlon knows that Jacob already knows this deep inside. But like most people, he is too uncomfortable to admit it.

“In the end,” says Marlon, “we need to create narratives that take different avenues but always end up at the same station. Let me show you what I mean.”

Marlon takes out his laptop and starts explaining Atlas Analytica’s use of the Big Five model. He demonstrates how different personality types can be persuaded by utilizing primary instincts such as fear, disgust, curiosity, anger, parental love and more. He then explains how a typical campaign comes alive. First by getting an individual’s attention, then her interest, then her desire to engage, and finally gets her to act. He shows Jacob how this process is accelerated by connecting an individual with like-minded people. An event which can naturally evolve into a movement that eventually feeds itself.

“Let me see if I’ve got this right,” says Jacob. “We are going to write up stories that support multiple themes. Themes that provoke interest and grab the attention of different personality types. Without talking about Paulsen’s report on the Greek economy?”

“Exactly,” says Marlon. “We write up a few stories that people like, are familiar with, and affect their individual concerns. Our algorithms will take care of the tweaking of wording, design, distribution, and ongoing analysis. Once we find a connection with our target audience, we start feeding them with information that links their personal causes to the campaign goal.”

“What about facts?”

“Nothing can be made up,” says Marlon. “All stories need to be grounded in facts. Or, more precisely, no story should have any facts arguing against it.”

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“Incredible,” says Jacob and drinks his beer. “Fucking incredible.”

“It’s not only news articles,” says Marlon. “We can run this campaign through several entertainment products. Games, videos, fiction—whatever people wish to consume and share with their friends.”

Jacob smiles and finishes his beer. “I knew I should have wrapped my head around this way earlier. Let’s get started.”

“What about food?”

“It can wait.”

“Alright,” says Marlon, appreciating Jacob’s enthusiasm. He doesn’t expect them to create any immediate miracles. The key at this stage is to get the ideas to flow.

They start discussing forth and back. Marlon is impressed by how quickly Jacobs gets down to business and starts spitting out numerous ideas that fit with each theme. Despite Jacob’s previously somewhat aloof and woozy behavior, he is now sharp and focused. After two intense hours, they have managed to create a lengthy list of story topics spanning from immigration, housing prices, pension schemes, healthcare, education, war, food prices, and so on. Marlon is happy with their first results. Sometimes, this process can take days.

“Now, let’s order some food,” says Jacob. “We need a break before we take a second look.”

They find out that the hotel has closed its kitchen, but they manage to get some sandwiches and a couple of beers.

“Where are you staying?” asks Marlon.

“Some thirty minutes away.”

“Nice?”

"A real dump."

"We could get you a room here if you want?"

"That's alright. I got all my stuff over there, and I'm checking out tomorrow morning."

Marlon takes a bite from his sandwich. "How's living in Berlin?"

"A city still within reach for the common man," says Jacob and gulps down his beer. "It's sad. All these rent-seekers destroying Europe from within. Look at London or Florence. They used to be intersections of creativity and innovation. Now, they are nothing but real estate havens for foreign thieves."

Marlon's computer shuts off. "Do you see a power outlet?"

They find out that the only power outlet is behind the bar.

"Don't you have a desk in your room?" asks Jacob.

Marlon points at his luggage. "I don't know. I haven't checked it out yet."

"Let's go and check, then," says Jacob. "We can get this done in a couple of hours, don't you think?"

"For sure, we only need to write up a few drafts. I'll do the fine-tuning tomorrow morning."

"When do you leave?" asks Jacob.

"I have a standby ticket."

They gather their stuff and head up the elevator.

Marlon's room is traditionally furnished. It has a twin-sized bed, a desk, a small table, and a tiny armchair.

"Take the desk," says Jacob as he enters the bathroom.

Marlon installs himself and gets back to work. He realizes that working with Jacob is quite enjoyable. He's

focused and quick, and there's no trace of fatigue. In contrast to Jacob, Marlon is longing to lie down.

One and a half hours later, Marlon summarizes their ideas and sends it to Arielle from R&D. She will run them through a demo environment in their database. If she does this by noon tomorrow, he thinks, they should have a decent first draft to show to LaFontaine by the evening.

Jacob opens the minibar and takes out two small bottles of whiskey. "You want one?" he asks, throwing it to Marlon before he has time to answer.

Marlon grabs the bottle, sits down on the bed, and rests his back against the wall. They open their bottles and raise them to the air in a symbolic toast. "Good job," says Marlon. "Sometimes I spend days with several writers to get the same results."

"I hope it will be savage enough," says Jacob with a sarcastic tone.

"It will," says Marlon. "But in a good way."

They drink.

"Did you write a novel?" asks Marlon.

Jacob laughs. "Yeah, that was a while back."

"Should I read it?"

"You do as you want."

"What's it about?"

"I don't know," says Jacob, looking away. "Exploring, loving, cheating, running away, the usual stuff."

"I see," says Marlon and feels the whiskey burning down his throat.

"I started writing about something different, though," says Jacob and finishes the bottle, his face twisting. "I had a daughter once. She was born with heart failure and only made it for six months. I had just moved back to Canada

and thought I was going to stay there. But my wife and I never managed to pull through the crisis, and then I was off again.”

“When was this?”

“Fifteen years ago.” Jacob puts his bottle on the table and opens the mini bar again. “Another one for the road?” he asks.

Marlon nods.

Jacob takes out two small bottles of brandy and throws one to Marlon.

“You know,” says Jacob, “Pat and I didn’t know each other until I was in my twenties and he was in his late thirties. We became friends when we were adults.”

“He mentioned something about you having different fathers,” says Marlon.

“That’s right,” says Jacob and starts telling the story of how they reunited. He explains that he was traveling through Europe at the time and that LaFontaine invited him to Paris. LaFontaine had just returned there after living in the United States for a while. Since that meeting, the brothers had tried to develop a deeper relationship. Their mother had died five years before their reunion, and neither one of their fathers was around anymore. Jacob never got to know his biological mother. When he was two years old, his father had met another woman, and they had raised Jacob as their own son. His stepmom is still alive and lives back in Canada, Jacob explains. Yet that’s all he chose to say about her.

Marlon detects a cloud hanging over Jacob’s head, and he picks up on Jacob’s need to let off some steam.

After a while, Marlon’s neck muscles start giving in. He slides farther down on the bed until finally resting his head

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on top of the pillow. He continues listening to Jacob, who is now speaking about his time living in Hong Kong, ranting on about the surreal experience of seeing both perverse excess and extreme poverty during the course of a single day. Marlon tries to stay active in the discussion. But, eventually, his eyelids become too heavy, and he closes his eyes. Marlon hears Jacob opening the minibar. Seconds later, he's out.

9

Marlon opens his eyes. His head is heavy, and his mouth is dry. The room is lit up from the daylight outside. He still has his clothes on. For a moment, he almost forgets where he is.

He raises up on his elbows and sees Jacob stretched out on the floor, hugging a pillow from the armchair. On the small table next to him stand assorted empty bottles representing the entire contents of the minibar.

Marlon looks at his phone. It's eight thirty in the morning. He takes his things and goes to the bathroom to take a shower. He feels hungover, although he didn't drink that much. He must just be tired, he thinks.

When Marlon finishes up and exits the bathroom, Jacob is awake.

"Breakfast?" asks Marlon.

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"I need to get going," says Jacob with a rugged voice. "It's almost nine."

"Alright," says Marlon. "I'll try to catch an early flight back."

Jacob starts gathering his things. "Tell Pat it was all me," he says and points at the empty bottles from the minibar.

"Don't worry about it," says Marlon. "You should grab a bottle of water for the road."

"Good thinking," says Jacob and grabs one from the minibar.

"Take both," says Marlon. "I'll walk you downstairs."

As they leave the room, the young dark-blond woman from the welcome desk walks past them in the corridor. Marlon meets her eyes, but she quickly looks away. *That's weird*, he thinks. Then, seconds later, it hits him. *Jacob wasn't a guest at the hotel. She must think...* Marlon feels like sinking through the floor. What are the odds?

The three of them walk up the corridor and reach the elevator at the same time. She is also going down to the lobby.

Marlon tries to think of something to say. An icebreaker. Something.

The elevator arrives. Marlon and Jacob position themselves against the back wall. The young woman is in front of them, facing the doors.

"Thanks for last night," says Jacob loud and clear.

"Right," mumbles Marlon.

"What was that?"

Marlon speaks up. "Yes, last night was good."

The young woman lowers her head and covers her mouth with her hand.

Marlon feels his chest heating.

Jacob hits Marlon in the side and breaks out into a smile.

Marlon shakes his head and looks away.

The elevator reaches the lobby, and the young woman is quick to exit.

“You said that on purpose?” says Marlon to Jacob.

Jacob put his hand on Marlon’s shoulder. “Now you have a reason to prove her wrong. You were glancing at her all night last evening.”

Marlon shakes his head again, trying not to smile.

“I’ll be in Paris as soon as I’m finished over here,” says Jacob.

“Alright,” says Marlon and shakes Jacob’s hand. “See you soon, then.”

“Sure,” says Jacob. “Take care now.”

Jacob exits the hotel and Marlon walks over to the hotel’s restaurant to grab breakfast.

Afterward, Marlon spends the rest of the morning back at his room. He finishes their draft from last night and books a flight back to Paris for five o’clock.

At noon, he heads down to the welcome desk to check out. He scouts for the young woman, but she is not in sight. He feels both disappointed and somewhat relieved.

After checking out, he leaves the hotel to search out a nearby restaurant. He continues down a narrow pedestrian street filled with cafés and small shops. He looks up, above the houses, and sees the ruins of the Acropolis. He stops for a second to admire it. He should’ve booked a later flight, he thinks.

The bright sun cuts through the chilly weather, and he opts to sit down outside at a nearby restaurant. The area is sparsely crowded with tourists and other seemingly

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carefree people. Marlon likes this. It's different from Paris, he thinks. Or, maybe it's the calm before the storm.

While eating a plate of grilled meats, he receives an email from Arielle.

Arielle has simulated their work through a demo environment in their database. The results look promising.

The simulation process, which uses historical data, doesn't guarantee anything. But as a first-level assessment, it looks good to include in their proposal to the prospect. Marlon reviews a few of the tweaks made by Arielle and sends his approval.

Shortly after, Marlon receives a message from LaFontaine. He asks Marlon to meet at a restaurant named Le Chat Blanc at eight o'clock the following morning. Marlon knows that LaFontaine moves fast on things he is passionate about. This project obviously falls into that category.

Marlon returns to his flat in Paris around ten o'clock later that evening. Tired from the trip, he winds down with a hot shower and goes straight to bed.

The next day, Marlon arrives at Le Chat Blanc five minutes to eight. When he enters the front door, the place is already buzzing with well-dressed people eating breakfast or having a quick coffee at the bar. The walls are dark and covered with large paintings. The interior appears to have changed little from year to year, or even from decade to decade.

Marlon spots LaFontaine sitting alone at a table at the end of the bar and next to the kitchen door. Two daily newspapers are spread across his table. Marlon walks over.

“Good morning.”

LaFontaine looks up. “Marlon, please sit down,” he says. “Did you eat breakfast?”

“Not really.”

LaFontaine gets the attention from a waiter, who hurries over immediately.

“Fresh orange juice and an omelet,” says LaFontaine and looks at Marlon. “What type of coffee do you like?”

“Double espresso.”

“Two of everything,” says LaFontaine to the waiter.

Marlon sits down.

LaFontaine takes off his reading glasses. “I like the results from the simulation,” he says. “I’d like to send the proposal tonight.”

“What’s their timeframe?”

“They want to make a shortlist by the end of the week.”

“Alright. I’ll make sure you have the final version this afternoon.”

LaFontaine nods and picks up one of his newspapers. “Did you read this article about the London real estate market?”

“No, I didn’t,” says Marlon.

“It says that a kid aged twenty-five years old living in London who earns thirty thousand pounds a year needs to save twenty percent of his net pay for forty-one years before he has enough money to put down equity on a two hundred and fifty thousand pound studio in North London. That’s not even an attractive part of the city.”

“I know,” says Marlon. “It’s out of control.”

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LaFontaine shakes his head. "Do you own any assets?" he asks.

"Not really."

"What about your friends?"

"Yeah."

"How did they finance themselves?"

Marlon shrugs his shoulder. "Mortgages? Family? I don't know."

"You know, most people my age think young people don't want to own any assets. If that's true, either your generation is flat out stupid, or you can't afford them."

Marlon hesitates. "Well, what can I say?"

"You aren't stupid, are you?"

"I mean, if I could I would, right?"

"How much was your bonus last year?"

"Ten thousand."

"And your base pay is somewhere around forty-five, right?"

"Right."

"So, where does that get you?"

"Well—" says Marlon, not entirely sure what to answer.

"Not too far, am I right?"

Marlon wrinkles his forehead.

"Still," says LaFontaine, "take the train a few hours from here, and you find kids ready to walk over dead bodies to get that type of money. Police officers included."

Marlon nods.

"My point is," says LaFontaine, "a market correction of Greek bonds may look bad in the short term. But easing the pressure through a few controllable losses may prevent the risk for something much worse. You see what I am saying?"

"I do," says Marlon. "You don't have to convince me. I have nothing to lose."

"That's my other point," says LaFontaine and smiles. "But it seems like you already figured that one out."

"By the way," says Marlon. "I meant to ask you something."

"What?"

"If the client is looking to short Greek bonds, won't we be subject to market manipulation?"

"Officially, we are not linked to anyone shorting anything. Neither are we aware of anyone doing anything of that nature. Whatever the client is up to on their end is not our business. We are being asked to promote facts, and that is what we do. Don't worry about it, our lawyers will make sure the contract is explicit on this point."

"I see," says Marlon.

"Are you thinking about making a bet for yourself?"

Marlon smiles and shakes his head. "Of course not."

"Good, because you're too young to go down that road."

"It hadn't even crossed my mind, to be honest."

LaFontaine looks at Marlon with a slight smile. "In the long run, Marlon, you'll benefit from this. Every kid in your shoes would."

Marlon nods again.

The waiter arrives with their order, and LaFontaine clears the newspapers from the table. "Now, let's eat breakfast," he says.

Towards the end of their meal, an older man, dressed in a neat black suit and black tie, walks out of the kitchen. When the man sees LaFontaine, he lights up with a smile and reaches out to greet him. It's evident that the two men

are friends. LaFontaine introduces Marlon to the man, whose name is Gerard, and is the owner of Le Chat Blanc.

“Thanks again for coming,” says LaFontaine to Marlon. “I will stay and have a quick chat with Gerard.”

Marlon picks up the signal and says goodbye to the two men and leaves.

Back at the office, Paul’s photo is still standing on the table next to the reception desk. More flowers are placed around it, and the notebook lays wide open with a pencil on top. Marlon walks up to the table and picks up the book. The pages are filled with people’s signatures and a few short messages with personal memories and last goodbyes. Marlon scans the pages. Most notes are modest and brief. But one stands out.

“They claim you wish for solidarity and peace,’ it reads. “That your death should not echo hate and revenge. They can say whatever they want but that’s all they will do, speak and deny not live and die. They will never dare to understand or walk through life with honor and pride. I will stand by my words and balance the scale. I will live with honor and bring you back to life. Next time, we’ll do it together and all the way to the end. Rest in peace, my friend. I’ll see you soon.’

Marlon reads the text twice, trying to figure out what it means. It must have been written by a close friend, he thinks. Nathan or Victor, perhaps?

He puts down the notebook and takes a moment to look at Paul’s photo. Then an instant reality check comes crashing down on him. *There’s no escape*, he thinks. *Not for any of us*. He taps silently on the table and heads to the elevator.

Moments later, as he steps onto the fifth floor, there's a lot of activity in the air. He hears David's high-pitched voice from one of the meeting rooms. Mario is standing by his desk, speaking to someone on the phone.

"What's going on?" asks Marlon.

"We just signed a major deal with Tricolore Media," Mario whispers.

Marlon pats Mario on his back. "Good job."

Tricolore Media is the largest media company in southern Europe, headquartered in Milan. Mario has spent the last year trying to get the lion's share of its online communications budget. It looks like he has finally succeeded.

"Did you sleep in?" asks Isabelle as Marlon passes her desk.

"Breakfast meeting," says Marlon.

"I heard that you got a special assignment?"

"Sort of. The client requested a confidentiality seal. It's not that exciting, though; trust me."

"How was Greece?"

"Good. Quick trip; didn't see much."

"Tom and I went there for our first vacation together," says Isabelle. "I loved it."

"You should go again. They could use the business."

Mario hangs up on his call. "Dinner, tonight?" he yells from his desk to Marlon and Isabelle.

"Maybe," says Isabelle.

"C'mon, I go to Milano tomorrow morning, and I don't know when I will be back."

"I'm in," says Marlon. "Where do we eat?"

"I don't know," says Mario. "Let's try something new."

"I know a place," says Marlon.

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“Yeah? What’s it called?” asks Isabelle.

“Come along, and you’ll find out,” says Marlon.

Isabelle squinches back at him.

David walks out of the conference room. “Marlon,” he yells. “Do you have a minute?”

Marlon follows David into his office.

“Congratulations on the new business,” says Marlon.

“How much are we talking about?”

“We don’t know yet, but we’re probably looking at five for this year, maybe more.”

“Nice,” says Marlon. “It would be our biggest account.”

“How was Greece?”

“Greece was good. But you know it was only prep work.”

“I don’t understand why we are looking in that direction. Their market is dead.”

“I know,” says Marlon. “But you know how it is.”

“Yeah, whatever the boss says, right?”

“Right,” says Marlon and offers a smile.

“We are going to need a lot of resources for this new account. But Pat told me to keep you out of it. He said you had other priorities.”

“Right,” says Marlon.

“I wanted to make sure we’re on the same page and that you didn’t think I was keeping you out on purpose.”

“No problem,” says Marlon. “I appreciate the thought.”

“Alright, good,” says David. “So, whatever you’re working on, I’m looking forward to seeing the outcome. This could be a good year for us.”

“It sure could.”

Marlon knows that David hates the fact that he is being kept outside an ongoing project. Marlon understands him.

It undermines his entire role as a manager. But what difference does it make?

Marlon spends the rest of the morning working with Arielle and Louis from R&D to finish their proposal to Paulsen and his team. He keeps an eye out for Victor and Nathan, but they don't seem to be in today. They are probably taking time off for the funeral, he thinks.

In the afternoon, Rita calls Marlon and asks him if he can be at the office at nine o'clock on Saturday morning. LaFontaine wants to meet. Marlon understands that it's not a question but a pointed request. However, he doesn't care. He's moving up.

Later that evening, Marlon, Mario, and Isabelle arrive at Le Chat Blanc. The atmosphere is more somber than the mood this morning, highlighted by white tablecloths and lit candles. Only half the tables are occupied with guests. Still, the waiter greeting them seems unsure whether he has any available seats. They are led to a small table for two at the edge of the room.

"I will get you another chair," says the waiter and disappears.

"Is he kidding with us?" says Mario. "There are plenty of available tables. We should go somewhere else."

Marlon looks over towards the bar and sees Gerard, the owner, walking out of the kitchen. Their eyes meet, but Marlon isn't sure if he recognizes him from this morning. Gerard says something to a young waitress standing next to the bar. The waitress looks at Marlon, and the moment after, she is on her way over.

"Good evening," says the young waitress. "Follow me, I have a table for you." She leads them to the same table that Marlon and Mr. LaFontaine dined at during breakfast.

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“Marlon,” says Gerard, greeting him with a welcoming smile and firm handshake. “I can see that you liked our food.”

“I sure did,” says Marlon and introduces Isabelle and Mario.

“This is Mia,” says Gerard. “She will take good care of you.”

Mia flashes a humble but confident smile and hands them their menu.

Mia has a trim body, dark-brown hair, smooth skin, and warm brown eyes.

“How do you know him?” asks Mario, surprised.

“I don’t,” says Marlon. “I only met him this morning.”

“This is where you had your breakfast meeting?” asks Isabelle.

“Yes, with Mr. LaFontaine. I think he’s a regular.”

“What about your new project?” asks Mario. “David said it had a confidentiality seal?”

“The client doesn’t want to leak any info before anything has been approved.”

“But it’s a sure thing?”

“We’ll find out at the end of the week.”

“Reminds me of that project we did for Anglo-Saxon Petroleum,” says Isabelle. “That was the longest confidentiality agreement I’ve ever signed.”

“That project was a disaster,” says Mario.

“We didn’t know what we were doing back then,” says Marlon. “Today, I think the results would have been different.”

Mia returns to their table with three glasses of Kir Royal. “Where are you from?” she asks.

They answer her question and Mia, who's in their age group, seems genuinely interested in their exchange.

When Mia and Marlon look at each other, he senses a curious look in her eyes.

After taking their orders and selecting their wine, Mia returns to their table and opens the bottle next to Marlon. She pours a small amount into his glass. He can feel her warm brown eyes looking at him as he smells the wine and taste it in his mouth.

When Mia leaves the table, he sees Isabelle staring at him and smiling. "Now I understand why you wanted to come back here," she says. "She's cute."

"I've never seen her before," says Marlon.

"Sure," says Isabelle.

"I'm serious," says Marlon.

"Right," says Mario and follows Isabelle's lead.

"Whatever," says Marlon. "But I admit, she's cute, yes."

Isabelle and Mario look at each other, celebrating their win.

As the dinner continues, Marlon realizes how much he has missed the friendly company of both Mario and Isabelle. They don't spend much time outside the office together, but he always felt like the three of them clicked. What's more, he thinks, they are probably his closest friends. But that's a fact he has never dared to share.

Mario puts down his glass. "The only reason the Italian government isn't already in a freefall," says Mario, "is because Berlin and Paris keep feeding the beast. They are too invested in their own interests. Both economic and political."

Marlon wishes he could tell them about his current project involving Greece. He knows that Mario and

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Isabelle wouldn't leak anything, but they are all better off if he keeps his mouth shut.

"Look," says Mario. "The migrant thing is spinning out of control. Yes, I support the Geneva Conventions and all, but I am not blind. Europe is painting itself into a corner. It's cultural suicide."

"What do you mean?" asks Isabelle.

"You know what I mean," says Mario. "And it's not only that. Now, they want me to feel ashamed of my own flag. The values my grandparents died for. Of course people are upset. It's a silent war, designed to suffocate."

Both Isabelle and Marlon keep quiet.

"What angers me," says Mario, "is that normal people, like my parents, get stuck with the bill. Not the politicians, celebrities, or the so-called elites. No wonder people are losing faith in the system. Ask my father. He used to like Europe. Now, he hates it and wants Italy to become independent again. You see, that's his perception. He doesn't see Italy as an independent country anymore. He feels colonized. And I don't think he is alone."

"What do you think will happen?" asks Marlon.

"I don't know," says Mario. "But you should know Europe by now. Nothing happens until it happens."

10

Marlon steps out of the elevator and onto the seventh floor. It's Saturday morning, five minutes to nine.

"Hi, Marlon," says Rita.

"Are you always working on Saturdays?" asks Marlon.

"Like you, only sometimes."

Rita is dressed casually, wearing a pair of worn-out jeans, a gray T-shirt, and a short black jacket. She looks great, thinks Marlon. He has always been curious about Rita's personal life. Barely forty years old, she has the looks of a leading actress. She wears no engagement ring, and as far as he knows, she has no kids. How could she? She is practically at the office all the time.

"Pat and Jacob are waiting for you inside," she says.

"Thanks," says Marlon and enters LaFontaine's office.

Jacob sits on top of the large meeting table, wearing the same wrinkled tweed jacket and worn-out boots as he had in Athens.

LaFontaine is benched behind his desk. Like Rita, he is casually dressed—jeans, a light-blue shirt, and a dark-blue pullover.

“Marlon,” shouts Jacob, and he jumps off the table.

“Good to see you,” says Marlon and shakes Jacob’s hand. “When did you get to Paris?”

“Yesterday.”

“And you finished that last article?”

“Done, done and done,” says Jacob and claps his palms together. “Finally moving on from that dry hole.”

“There’s breakfast on the table,” says LaFontaine and hints at a paper bag filled with various breakfast pastries.

“Thanks,” says Marlon and grabs a warm *pain au chocolat*.

“We did good,” says LaFontaine. “Paulsen’s team likes the proposal and wants to meet.”

“Alright,” says Marlon. “So they understand our approach?”

“They know what we have in mind, but it’s necessary to get everyone on the same page.”

“When do we meet?”

“Monday,” says LaFontaine. “In Abidjan.”

“Where?” asks Marlon.

“Ivory Coast,” says LaFontaine. “It’s an easy six-hour flight, direct from Paris.

“Officially, it’s called *Côte d’Ivoire*,” says Jacob. “It’s a diplomatic thing, but it could be good to remember.”

“Why are we meeting them in West Africa?” asks Marlon.

“Their main guy is down there on business, and I want us to be first on the ball. Show them that we get out of our way to get things done. You know how we do this.”

“I know,” says Marlon. “Who’s going?”

“You and Jacob will fly down there tomorrow afternoon. You need to collect your visa today at their embassy. Rita is preparing your file. Jacob has already had his processed through the embassy in Berlin.”

“Ever been to Africa?” Jacob asks Marlon.

“Never,” says Marlon. “I was supposed to go to Senegal last year, but it got canceled the last minute. Got all the vaccination shots, though.”

“To legitimize the urgency of your visas,” says LaFontaine, “I’ve signed you up for the same local investment conference that our contact is attending.”

“What’s his story?” asks Marlon.

“His name is Mark Huber. He’s Dutch and works for a private investment fund in Amsterdam named Tangerine Investments.”

“Never heard of them,” says Marlon.

“They are low profile,” says LaFontaine. “No marketing, no website. That kind of firm.”

“I see,” says Marlon. “Have we signed anything with them?”

“Only the nondisclosure agreement,” says LaFontaine. “Our lawyers are going through their proposed contract as we speak. I will take care of that while you two scramble in there, grab the ball, and start running.”

“What about Paulsen?” asks Marlon.

“Paulsen owns the intellectual property of the report, but it seems like they are keeping him out of the process,” says LaFontaine. “I figure that Mark’s team is spearheading this

thing from a marketing perspective. Paulsen will probably get involved down the road, but we will crack that nut later.”

Marlon understands. After researching Paulsen and reviewing his few public appearances, it’s obvious that Paulsen is unable to speak in a clear and understandable language and looks like a mannequin with stiff joints. He is not groomed to reach out to a vast and diverse European population in such a short time.

“When should we involve Sofia?” asks Jacob.

“Who is Sofia?” asks Marlon.

“Another writer,” says LaFontaine. “She’s a close ally to Jacob.”

“Also from the *Economic Times*?”

“She’s a freelancer,” says Jacob. “She’s young, smart, independent, and clearheaded. She is going to be perfect for this campaign, trust me.”

“She’s Portuguese,” says LaFontaine. “I could be an advantage to have a perspective from the periphery.”

“Where is she now?” asks Marlon.

“We will get to her when you are back from Abidjan,” says LaFontaine. “There’s no need to get her involved at this stage.”

Rita enters the office with a cup of coffee and a stack of papers for Marlon’s visa application. “Your appointment is at two o’clock,” she says. “Don’t be late. They are usually closed on Saturdays.”

“Thanks,” says Marlon.

When Rita has left the room, Marlon turns to LaFontaine. “About Australia,” he says.

“Jacob,” says LaFontaine. “Give us a minute.”

Jacob grabs two croissants. “I’m out.”

Marlon sits down in front of LaFontaine's desk. "I did some research."

"And?"

"We should move fast. If they adopt the same regulations as here in Europe, we only have a window of two to three years, I think."

"That's why I want this in motion before the summer."

"I'm all in."

"And you're happy with the terms?"

"Yes."

"I'll give you two and a half percent of the local business."

"Sounds like a good deal."

LaFontaine leans back, crosses his fingers, and inspects Marlon's eyes. He was expecting a negotiation. "You know that the shares are vested over three years?"

"Right."

"You get one percent up front and the rest the coming years?"

"Got it. When do we start?"

LaFontaine clears his throat. "As soon as we have this Greek campaign up and running," he says. "Give it three to four months. A large part of the contract is based on the result. Meaning that we get paid when the market starts to move."

"Alright," says Marlon. "Let's make it happen then."

"I'll give you five percent. Half up front."

"I don't—"

"I want you to have it. End of discussion."

Marlon nods his head.

A phone on the desk vibrates.

"Is it yours?" asks LaFontaine.

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“No.”

Jacob pops in his head through the door. “Did I leave my phone in here?”

“Get in here,” says LaFontaine. “I want us to go through the proposal before Marlon is off to collect his visa.”

At one o’clock, Marlon leaves the office to get his visa at the embassy of *Côte d’Ivoire*, located in Paris’s 16th arrondissement. Not far from Marlon’s flat.

Arriving at the embassy, Marlon enters through a high metal gate. Two armed military soldiers greet him on a large courtyard. The soldiers give him a light body search and place him in a small reception room next to the entrance. Fifteen minutes later, a tall African man walks across the courtyard towards him. The man is smartly dressed in a suit and tie and well-polished shoes. He stops in front of the soldiers, and they exchange a few words. The two soldiers laugh, and the man pats one of the soldiers on his back. When the man enters the reception room, his face hardens. “Monsieur Renner,” he says.

“Yes,” says Marlon and stands up.

“ID.”

Marlon hands him his passport. The man takes his time to examine the content.

“Follow me,” the man says.

Marlon follows the man’s rapid long steps across the courtyard into another building. They walk through a long corridor and into a large empty room. The room resembles an old ballroom, with high ceilings and an old wooden floor. The room’s only furniture is a large empty desk and two plastic chairs.

“Papers,” says the man.

Marlon hands him the file prepared by Rita.

The man opens it and spreads out the documents across the table. The file includes copies of Marlon's passport, birth certificate, plane tickets, proof of residence, vaccination card, a signed letter from Atlas Analytica that assures the purpose of his visit and its financial backing, and a completed visa application form.

The man stands up behind the desk while validating each document with his signature. When he's done, he looks up at Marlon. "How many sons do you have?"

"None."

"You are not married?"

"No."

"Business trip?"

"Yes."

"It says here you have two passports. Are you American or German?"

"I was born in Germany, but my parents are American. I moved to the U.S. when I was three years old. I keep my German passport for convenience."

"Of course," says the man and scribbles down his signature.

"Is everything in order?" asks Marlon.

"It's okay," says the man and starts gathering the documents into a pile. "You know, I studied at the University of Pennsylvania."

"It's a good school," says Marlon.

"I liked it," says the man. "Go down to the entrance of this building and walk to your right. A secretary will take a picture of you and record your fingerprints."

Marlon shakes the man's hand and thanks him for his time.

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“Good luck,” says the man and hurries out of the room in another direction.

A female secretary with a heavy French accent takes a photo of Marlon and documents his fingerprints. She gladly tells him about different things he should see and do when he arrives in Abidjan. Marlon barely understands her but listens politely and does his best to connect, smiling and nodding his head. The woman looks amused.

Marlon eventually exits the embassy with the visa attached to his passport. Being the only visitor at the embassy, he understands that someone made an effort for his special treatment.

Walking towards his apartment, his empty stomach reminds him that he hasn't had any lunch yet. He immediately thinks about Le Chat Blanc. Would it be weird if he went there again? It would be his third time in only a few days. *Whatever*, he thinks. He's hungry, and he likes the place. That's enough reasons.

Twenty minutes later, Marlon arrives at the restaurant. The peak of the lunch hour has come to an end, and most tables are being cleared. As he had hoped, he spots Mia working at the back of the room next to the kitchen. He asks another waiter for a seat in the back and gets led to an empty two-seat table against the wall. As he sits down, he starts feeling a bit nervous. His confidence slowly fades away and is replaced with an unwelcome dose of anxiety. *What if she finds me creepy and desperate?* he thinks. After all, coming back alone like this is like making a statement. He didn't even prepare what to say. *What if she already has a boyfriend? Shit, I didn't even think of that. What if I misread the signs?*

Mia approaches his table. "Hi there," she says. "Did you forget something?"

"Hi," says Marlon. "No, I don't think I did."

"So why did you come back?" she asks, raising her eyebrows.

Here we go, he thinks. He must have misread the signs. Why didn't I think this through? Why did I let my emotions blindly lead me over the cliff?

Mia continues staring at him, seemingly expecting an explanation to what he is doing here.

"I came to eat," says Marlon.

Mia lights up with a smile and puts her hand on his shoulder. "I'm messing with you," she says, with a sparkle in her eye. "I thought you would say that you came back for me."

"Of course," he says while beating himself once more inside.

"Excuse my humor," she says. "It's been a busy day."

"I admit," he says, "I was hoping that you were working today."

Mia looks away and smiles. "What can I get you?"

"What do you recommend?"

"Do you like fish?"

"Sure."

"You should have the sea bass. I ate it earlier. It tastes like the sea."

"I love the sea."

"Do you want a glass of wine?"

"If you choose one."

"Great," she says and straightens her back. "See you soon."

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Marlon leans back in his chair and looks out over the restaurant. Most people have finished their meals, and the smell of coffee is drifting from the bar. You can tell that it is a Saturday, he thinks. The atmosphere is calm, and no one appears to be in a rush. A family of four with two small children, a boy and a girl, sits at a nearby table. The children sit on one side, engaging in their own discussion, and the parents on the opposite. Marlon can't help but stare and take notice of the details. The father's hand gently resting on the mother's thigh. The small girl curiously observing her brother as he speaks about his dessert. The genuine smile on the mother's lips as she looks at her children.

Marlon thinks about his parents. *What happened?* he thinks. Why did they stop being a family? Was it because of his mother or father, or someone else? Was it because of him? He can't remember when and why they stopped communicating with each other in a loving and caring way. He feels his emotions mixing up inside his stomach. He looks away and clears his throat. *Get a grip*, he tells himself. He's the one who moved away, not them. He's the one who's in control, not anyone else.

Moments later, Mia returns with a steaming plate of food. Her smile and warm presence immediately turn Marlon's mood around.

"Like you, he's fresh from the Atlantic," she says and places the plate of fish in front of him. "And a glass of Chablis."

"Thank you," says Marlon. "Smells fantastic."

"You're welcome," she says and turns around with a proud expression on her face.

Marlon eats his food, keeps his phone in his pocket, and enjoys the scenery folding out in front of him. The family of four has finished their meal, and the two kids are struggling to put their coats on. Two older men sit at the bar, discussing and drinking coffee. Mia and her colleagues are handing out bills and cleaning out tables.

As Marlon eats the last piece of food from his plate, Mia places an open bottle of wine and a second glass on his table. "Do you mind if I join you?" she asks.

"Please," he says and sits up straight and wipes his mouth.

Mia sits down opposite him. "Did you like it?" she asks.

"Yes, very much," he says. "You're right, it tastes like the sea."

She pours wine into their glasses and takes a piece of bread from his breadbasket.

"How long have you worked here?" asks Marlon.

"About four months," she says. "I'm studying marketing here in Paris. My family has a small wine business back home."

"Back home is Bourgogne, right?"

"That's right," she says. "You remember."

"How long have you been in Paris?"

"Almost a year now."

"Do you like it?"

"I like it," she says. "Although it can be a bit lonely sometimes."

"You seem very outgoing," he says.

"I don't know," she says. "When I'm working, it's different."

"Yeah?"

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"In Paris, people only talk to you when they are expected to talk to you. Otherwise, they act like you don't exist."

"It's the same in most big cities," says Marlon. "Kind of like a survival technique, I guess."

"Maybe," she says.

"What's your plan after finishing your studies?" he asks.

"Joining the family business?"

"I'll see," she says. "I have some disagreements with my father. I'm trying to persuade him to go online. You know, build a community and expand outside of France."

"Sounds like a brilliant idea."

"My father doesn't speak English and has no idea how the internet works. He is very risk-averse."

"I get it," says Marlon. "I'm sure he'll change his mind once you show him the potential."

Mia shrugs her shoulders and sips her wine.

"Anyhow," says Marlon. "You've got me interested now. Tell me more about your ideas."

Mia smiles and puts down her glass.

Marlon enjoys listening to her. She is smart, and her English is excellent.

After some time, Gerard walks over to their table carrying two desserts. "Leftovers," he says. "Crème brûlée and Tiramisu."

"You read my mind," says Marlon.

Gerard puts his hand on Marlon's shoulder. "Appetite," he says. "It says a lot of a man."

"What about women?" asks Mia.

Gerard smiles. "Women too," he says and turns away.

"Which one do you prefer?" Marlon asks Mia.

"Let's split."

"Are they okay with you not working?"

“My shift is over,” she says. “Actually, I’m going to a concert at the American church. It starts at five.”

“I’ve never been there.”

“No?” says Mia, surprised. “Then you should come with me. It’s very nice, and it’s free.”

“Do you go there a lot?”

“Not for service but sometimes when they have concerts.”

“To be honest, I never go to church,” says Marlon.

“Me not so much either,” she says. “It’s a nice way to be around people.”

“I see what you mean.”

They eat their desserts and continue talking. Marlon enjoys the moment, and he has a feeling it’s mutual.

“Will you wait here while I go and change?” asks Mia.

“Sure, take your time.”

Shortly after, Mia returns dressed in an all-black outfit, black overcoat, and a red scarf. She has washed her face, applied some light makeup and redone her hair. As she passes in front of him, he can smell the scent of her perfume. It’s deep, warm, and playful. A perfect fit.

“You look fresh,” says Marlon.

“Thank you,” she says.

There’s something mysteriously beautiful about her, he thinks. She is confident and proud yet vulnerable and modest at the same time.

As they walk outside together, he thanks himself for having followed his gut and returned to the restaurant.

The American church is a 15th-century building in gothic design located on the left bank of the Seine river. When they arrive, Mia says hello to a young man standing outside and smoking a cigarette. The young man, whose name is

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Lucas, is a young American from Atlanta who came to Paris three months ago. Lucas works off the books at a restaurant while saving some cash to buy a ticket to Senegal, the country where he believes his ancestors originate from.

“Perspective,” says Lucas. “I thought I understood the dynamics of our society. But like everyone else, I only knew my own reality. The rest have been fed to me by people with their own agendas.” Lucas inhales his cigarette smoke. “Just look at the news,” he says. “Each outlet preaching to its own choir. Then you have all the protests. Nobody presents a unified vision. It’s always about blaming this or that. Or victimizing somebody or something. Meanwhile, the kids on the street can barely talk or read a book. I’ll be honest with you, I think the whole thing will erupt soon. Then, hopefully, progress will come.”

“You sound like a doomsday preacher,” says Mia.

“I’m sorry for the negativity,” says Lucas. “But it’s how I feel. And it’s why I left. I didn’t want to stick around and complain, you know.”

“Why France?” asks Marlon.

“No reason. My uncle has a friend who lives here. And you can grab a direct flight to Dakar.”

“Are you staying with your friend right now?”

“I did, for a month. But he is living cramped up out in the suburbs, and I don’t want any drama. Now, I’m staying above the restaurant close to Gare du Nord. It’s a small room with a bed, but it’s cheap and peaceful. I like it.”

“We should get inside,” says Mia. “It’s Marlon’s first time coming here.”

“Yeah?” says Lucas. “You know, the King preached here once. Back in the sixties.”

“The King?” asks Mia.

“Martin Luther King Jr.”

They get inside and sit down. Marlon can hear other American voices. He knew about the church’s existence, but he has never thought about coming. He figured it would just be another hangout for expats.

A choir of some twenty males and females stands in front of the audience. They start singing in a soft and collected voice. Marlon leans back in his seat. The choir’s tone is vague and sleepy, and Marlon starts thinking about what he should pack for his trip to Abidjan tomorrow. Then the singing stops, and after a few seconds of silence, a clear, stable, thick, and beautiful female voice starts singing behind them. The voice is powerful. Marlon’s neck hairs stand up. Everyone turns around and sees a woman standing on the balcony singing the first verse of “Amazing Grace.” The words and the melody catch Marlon off guard and start stirring a cocktail of emotions inside of him. Last time he heard this song was during his grandparents’ funeral. He was sitting between his parents and holding both their hands. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. He thinks about his parents and how much he loves them. He opens his eyes and swallows hard. He looks at Mia, who looks back at him with a soft smile. Then he looks around and sees the entire room being spellbound by the woman’s voice. This is pure power, he thinks, and feels the emotional connection reaching deep into his bones.

After the concert, Marlon and Mia say goodbye to Lucas and take a walk towards Les Invalides. They keep close,

their arms touching enough to feel the heat from each other's bodies. Mia tells him about her life, and he is happy to listen to her observations and thoughts. They walk all the way around the Dôme des Invalides—the impressive gold-cupolaed chapel that hosts the tomb of Napoleon Bonaparte. Then they continue back towards the river until they reach Pont Alexandre III—the historical bridge that stretches across the river to the enormous glass-vaulted complex of Le Grand Palais. In the middle of the bridge, in front of its many golden-colored sculptures, Mia spontaneously stretches out her arms and breaks out into an effortless pirouette.

“Amazing, isn't?” she says with a happy smile on her face.

Marlon soaks up Mia's joyful energy and looks up to embrace the splendor of their surroundings. “It is,” he says. “It's unreal.”

Both of them lean towards the stone railing of the bridge. They look at each other under the dim light, the chilly winds stroking their bare cheeks. Marlon stares into Mia's brown eyes and sees a familiar longing for intimacy and warmth. She moves towards him, and he puts his hands around her back. He feels her tender figure surrender in his arms. She smiles, leans forward, and closes her eyes. He gently puts his hand behind her ear and strokes his fingers across her neck. He feels her hands squeezing his back, and he slowly moves his mouth towards her lips.

11

“I’ll be back in a minute,” says Marlon and hurries out of the car.

Inside the office, entering the fifth floor, he meets Xavier sitting at his desk.

“You’re alone?” asks Marlon.

“Everyone is in Milan.”

“Everyone?”

“I know. Probably for show.”

Marlon gives Xavier a quick handshake and continues to his desk.

“Did you hear about Nathan?” yells Xavier. “One of the new guys down on the second floor.”

“No, what about him?”

“He quit. Joined the army.”

“Yeah?”

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“Came in one morning with a shaved head, told Beatrice, and then he left. No notice. Period. Kind of badass.”

Marlon grabs his power adaptor and walks back next to Xavier. “Who told you?”

“The guys on the second.”

“Did they say anything more?”

“Not really,” says Xavier. “Where are you going?”

“Abidjan.”

“Where?”

“*Côte d’Ivoire*. I got to go. My Über is waiting downstairs.”

About an hour and a half later, Marlon reaches his gate at Charles de Gaulle airport. Jacob is already there, sitting outside and reading on his tablet.

“Look at this,” says Jacob and shows him an article titled ‘Strong Greek recovery leads to new round of funding.’

“The Central Bank?” asks Marlon.

“Taxation without representation,” says Jacob.

“The price of stability, perhaps?”

“Yes, that must be it,” says Jacob ironically. “Because Greece is the ultimate poster child for stability.”

Marlon doesn’t bother answering. “C’mon,” he says. “Let’s go and have a drink in the lounge.”

Roughly seven hours later, they land in Abidjan, 9 PM local time.

After passing through the customs, Marlon finds an ATM and withdraws one thousand euros in the local currency. He gives Jacob half of it. “Let me know if you need more,” he says.

“Is my brother generous on the expense account?”

“As long as you can explain the receipts.”

“Of course,” says Jacob, smiling. “Let’s grab a cab.”

Outside the airport, the sky is dark, the air is humid, and the temperature is around seventy degrees. They exit on a large parking lot where a hoard of people and cars are in motion.

"That's the one," says Jacob and points to a red-painted taxi car. "The red ones take you across the city."

"When was the last time you came here?" asks Marlon.

"It was a long time ago," says Jacob.

A soft male voice appears behind them. "Gentlemen, hold on."

They turn around and see a young man, neatly dressed in khakis and a blue polo shirt, flashing them a wide, friendly smile.

"Where are you going?" the young man asks.

"Straight home," says Jacob.

"I can drive you," says the young man.

"That's alright," says Jacob and walks past him.

"Boss," says the young man, "whatever you want I can get it for you. You're in paradise now."

"We're good," says Jacob without turning around.

Marlon gives the young man a quick nod.

"Almost forgot," says Jacob. "Supposedly old and wise, I guess I have to remind you about protection."

"What do you mean?" asks Marlon.

"You know what I mean."

Marlon laughs. "Right."

Jacob stops. "What, do you think I'm joking?"

"Are you asking me if I brought condoms?"

"No," says Jacob. "I'm asking if you brought a bullet-proof vest."

"C'mon."

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Jacob looks at Marlon with a serious face. "You're single, right?"

Marlon nods.

"These girls are both pretty and persuasive. When you think you have it under control, it's already too late."

"I get it," says Marlon. "Don't worry about it."

"Good," says Jacob and continues walking. "At least it's on the record now."

The taxi driver is leaning against the hood, reading a newspaper. He looks up at them and nods. "Where are you going?" he asks with a local accent.

"The Plateau," says Jacob.

The driver throws his newspaper into the open car window. "Let's go."

Marlon and Jacob sit down in the backseat.

Jacob looks over at Marlon. "I didn't mean to sound like an asshole."

"No, you're right," says Marlon. "It's a serious thing."

"People who didn't live through the eighties tend to forget," says Jacob and looks out the window.

Marlon looks at Jacob's duffle bag laying on the seat between them. "I like your bag," he says.

"It was my father's. He gave it to me the day he found out he had cancer."

"Yeah?"

"I guess it was his way of passing the torch. He died shortly afterward."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, me too."

The driver holds up a pack of cigarettes. "You want?" he asks.

Jacob grabs one. "Sure, why not," he says. "Where are you from?"

"My parents were from Ghana," says the driver.

"Were you here doing the coup?" asks Jacob.

"I was," says the driver and looks at Jacob in the rearview mirror. "I'm glad it's over."

"I can imagine," says Jacob. "How's the vibe right now?"

"This is a rich country," says the driver and inhales his cigarette. "But we are too nice. Everyone is trying to pick our pockets."

"I hope it will be different this time," says Jacob.

"Me too."

Marlon looks out the window and observes their surroundings. The asphalted road is in excellent condition. The same goes for the street lamps illuminating it from above. The traffic leading out from the airport is dense but relatively calm. A few random people walking and bicycling along the sides. The landscape is flat and tropical, decorated with green grass and palm trees. Signs and billboards are written in French. They pass a warehouse, a gas station, a restaurant, and a grocery store.

"Keep that in mind," says Jacob and hits Marlon on his arm.

"What?" asks Marlon.

The car slows down behind two army vehicles standing by the road. Next to them stands a group of soldiers carrying automatic rifles. A civilian car is parked between them, and one of the soldiers is speaking to the driver.

"Tensions are growing within the military," says Jacob. "Something to do with their budget."

"Yeah?"

CROWD OF ONE

“Makes them more incentivized to request bribes and whatnot.”

“I read about the checkpoints,” says Marlon.

“Yes, that’s another point to remember,” says Jacob. “The main roads in and out of the city are closed between midnight and five in the morning. If you’re on the wrong side, you’re locked out. There are no exceptions.”

“Why do they do that?”

“Security tactics,” says Jacob. “To keep rebels from attacking in the dark. The checkpoints were set up back in 2011. After the last civil war.”

The soldiers let the car in front of them pass, and the traffic starts flowing again.

As they continue ahead, Marlon looks at the soldiers through the window. Most of them are his age.

Marlon sees one of the soldiers staring at their car. He meets the soldier’s eyes.

The soldier takes a step forward, gripping his rifle with both hands. A sudden beat of naked reality pumps through Marlon’s body.

Someone pats the soldier on his shoulder, and he looks away. Their eye contact breaks and they continue driving ahead.

Marlon looks over at Jacob who appears fully relaxed and unbothered about the situation. Jacob is casually smoking his cigarette and resting his hand outside the open window.

“So, we’re meeting this Mark Huber guy tomorrow at lunch?” asks Jacob.

“Yes, at eleven thirty inside the conference.”

“What’s that conference about again?”

“Local investment opportunities.”

“Right. And about our meeting, are we prepared?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“No need for an early wake-up then?”

“We can take our time.”

“I don’t know about you, but I could use a good night of sleep.”

“Me too,” says Marlon. “I’m dead tired.”

They reach a bridge that crosses over a large passage of water. The water is part of the Ébrié Lagoon, which stretches through the city of Abidjan and separates itself from the Atlantic Ocean by a narrow coastal strip. On the other side of the bridge, a skyline with a few medium-sized office buildings presents itself.

“They call it the Manhattan of West Africa,” says the driver while chain-smoking another cigarette.

Although the skyline has little resemblance to that of Manhattan’s, it clearly deviates from Marlon’s preconceived thoughts of the place.

They cross the bridge and enter an area crowded with both old and modern-looking buildings, construction sites, and well-known logos of Western corporations. They drive up a small hill where they reach their hotel, a ten-story building with a view over the lagoon. In its context, the hotel appears quite modern, but you can tell that its glory days passed one or two decades ago.

Marlon’s and Jacob’s rooms are on separate floors. After checking in, they go straight to the hotel’s restaurant. The room’s crowd is made up of middle-aged African, European, and Chinese business people.

Shortly after, stuffed with a local beef stew and a cold beer, they retreat to their rooms, exhausted and ready to sleep.

CROWD OF ONE

In his room, Marlon turns off the lights and walks up to the large window facing the lagoon. The water rests quietly outside, and a few high palm trees sway lightly in the wind. Below the hotel, at the bottom of the hill, stretches a busy highway. A large team of barely visible construction workers is pouring hot asphalt onto the road. While looking out towards the dark distance and trying to grasp the foreign context, Marlon questions the rationale to travel this far to meet a Dutch businessman concerning a project in Europe. But as LaFontaine had argued, that's the point.

Marlon has been told that Mark is a decisive person who likes to cut straight to the point. Marlon likes that type. Hopefully, Jacob will stick to the plan and let Marlon do most of the talking. Those were the orders from LaFontaine himself.

Marlon snaps a photo of the view and sends it to Mia.

Mia responds with a photo of herself lying in bed covered by her duvet. The photo is innocent, but the gesture is intimate.

Marlon looks into her eyes, thinking about their moment last night.

After leaving the bridge, he and Mia had walked to her metro stop and kissed once more before saying goodbye.

The next morning, Marlon wakes up at six thirty. The sun is shining through his window.

He has time to sleep in, he thinks. But he has too much energy to stay in bed.

He sends Jacob a message, writing that he will get an early start and check out the conference. He suggests that they meet there an hour before their meeting with Mark

Huber. Then he takes a shower, and he puts on his tailored navy suit and a crisp white shirt. No tie.

He grabs a quick breakfast and does the five-minute walk over to the conference building next to the hotel.

The cloudy sky and the warm humid air is better suited for shorts and sandals rather than suits and dress shoes. Luckily, the venue is air-conditioned. The venue is modest and has an auditorium and a banquet hall. It's in the banquet hall where they will meet with Mark Huber later.

Marlon enters the auditorium filled with other foreigners. Everyone is dressed in suits, with conference passes hanging around their necks.

The first speaker to take the stage is the country's prime minister, followed by a string of sharply dressed salesmen who market local infrastructure projects and financing opportunities. With no personal interest in the topic, Marlon is quickly bored.

During the first intermission, he sneaks out and takes a seat in the empty banquet hall and kills some time on his phone. When he looks up, he sees Jacob entering the room. Jacob is newly showered, shaved, wearing a clean white shirt, gray suit-pants, and black dress shoes. Must be the works of LaFontaine, thinks Marlon and smiles to himself.

"Looking sharp," says Marlon.

"Thanks," says Jacob. "I ditched the jacket, though. It's too warm outside. Should I go get it?"

"That's alright," says Marlon.

"You were up early. Did you sleep well?"

"Sure. What about you?"

"Took a while. I guess I'm a bit nervous."

CROWD OF ONE

“Don’t be,” says Marlon. “All we need to do is sit back and listen. Not talk too much. Just listen.”

Jacob nods his head.

Twenty minutes later, a wide-shouldered man, wearing a dark suit and a red tie, walks towards their table with a rapid step and a determined look. He stares at Marlon and says, “Atlas, I assume?”

“That’s right,” says Marlon and stands up. “You must be Mark?”

They shake hands, and Mark sits down, placing two phones on the table in front of him.

“Alright,” says Mark. “I was told that you are the go-to guys for this. But tell me, have you ever pulled off anything like this before?”

“Depends on what you have in mind,” says Marlon. “Swaying the opinion of millions of people? Yes, many times. Convincing entire nations to default on their sovereign debt? Sure, we’ve done a few.”

“Ha,” says Mark. “That’s a good one.”

“It is,” says Marlon. “Like a volcanic eruption.”

Mark raises his eyebrows. “Really?”

Marlon stares back at him.

Mark’s phone buzzes. “I need to take this,” he says and picks up the phone.

Jacob leans over to Marlon and whispers, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but was that code for Iceland?”

Marlon looks back at Jacob.

“Seriously,” whispers Jacob. “Was Atlas Analytica involved in that?”

“I wouldn’t know,” says Marlon and waves over a waiter. “It was before my time, but ask your brother.”

The waiter arrives.

“What are you serving?” asks Marlon.

“Fish or chicken, sir.”

“I’ll have chicken,” says Marlon. “What about you?”

“Sure, chicken,” says Jacob.

“We’ll have three chickens and three cold beers,” says Marlon.

Mark finishes his call. “So I read your proposal with all that Big Five psychology stuff. I didn’t get too deep into the details, but it seems to make sense. Still, isn’t it more effective to go straight to the point. Simply push the facts in people’s faces?”

“We could try,” says Marlon. “Though, I’m pretty sure the opposition is already well prepared to fend off those facts. As far as I know, Mr. Paulsen has already been down that road.”

“Yes,” says Mark. “But that was without professional help.”

“Look,” says Marlon, and he focuses on Mark’s eyes. “We both know that the guys you are trying to affect only bend for one thing. That is, having their own blood spilled while they are still alive. If you are serious about stirring things up, for real, you need to think guerrilla warfare. We need to hit them from multiple directions. Build up momentum before we go for the knockout.”

“How?” asks Mark.

“Organized chaos,” says Marlon. “We’ll create multiple campaigns in all the countries you wish to target. We go for campaign themes that strike people at their core emotions. I’m talking about themes that provoke primary emotions such as fear, disgust, anger, all of them. The aim is to create a narrative of conflict.”

“Narrative of conflict?”

“It’s what plays an overwhelming part in the psychology of every crowd.”

Mark smiles with the corner of his mouth. “What type of conflict do you have in mind?”

“In today’s climate, you have hundreds of conflicts waiting to be picked up and intensified by the right movements. The economy, public schools, healthcare, immigration, the church, Islam, racism. There is something out there for everyone. Something that people are ready to take a stand for. Because they are real.”

Mark’s phone buzzes again. He declines the call. “How far are you willing to take this?” he asks.

“You tell me.”

Mark looks around him. “Okay, let me be clear,” he says. “Obviously, this campaign will be financed by shorting assets linked to the Greek debt. If we take it too far, we may overshoot and contaminate the overall market. But if we don’t push hard enough, the politicians will simply arrange another bailout. We don’t want to go too far in any of those directions. We need people inside the Eurozone to be highly skeptical about their economic future. And they need to believe that a Greek exit will save the day. The same must be true for people inside Greece. I don’t care how it’s done. I just want enough pressure on the system to stimulate that type of scenario. Do you follow?”

“We get it,” says Marlon. “That’s why we like this project. As outlined in our proposal, you will have real-time access to the movements of public opinions in multiple nations. Nobody has that capability but us. And it’s all legal.”

Mark nods his head. “Okay,” he says. “Let’s try it.”

“Okay,” says Marlon. “What about Paulsen? How do we involve him in this?”

“You use him however you need to use him,” says Mark. “But he doesn’t need to know about the inner workings of the campaign. Leave him to defend his report. I don’t want him to lose focus.”

“No problem,” says Marlon. “We’ll prepare him for what’s coming.”

Mark pockets his two phones. “I’ll organize the connection when I’m back.”

“I assume you are running things from your end?”

Mark nods. “There are plenty of people behind me,” he says.

Two waiters arrive with their food and drinks. Mark grabs his beer bottle and raises it in the air. “Cheers,” he says and chugs half of it. “I need to run. I have another lunch meeting.”

“For sure,” says Marlon. “We got what we need,”

“By the way,” says Mark and stands up. “We’re co-sponsoring a dinner tonight. You should come. Where are you staying?”

“Next door,” says Marlon.

“I’ll have a car pick you up at eight, alright?”

They shake hands, and Mark exits the room with the same rapid step as he entered with.

“Good guy,” says Marlon and sits down again. He cuts off a piece of meat from his chicken. “I like the set-up.”

“Did we get the project?” asks Jacob.

“Yeah,” says Marlon. “We’re doing the project.”

Jacob wrinkles his forehead and starts picking on his chicken.

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Marlon senses Jacob's confusion. "I know," he says. "This was mainly about the handshake."

Jacob takes a sip of his beer. "Now what?"

"I guess next up is the dinner tonight," says Marlon. "We could have a look around the city. What do you say?"

"I don't know," says Jacob. "Honestly, I feel like taking a nap back at the hotel. All that insomnia from last night is starting to kick back at me."

"I'll walk with you," says Marlon.

They finish their meal and drink another beer.

After following Jacob to the hotel, and changing into a pair of shorts and a loose shirt, Marlon walks down the road and towards the lagoon. Despite being in an office area, there aren't that many people outside, and the traffic is light.

Not far from the hotel, Marlon walks into a park that has a narrow pathway through it. Some thirty yards in, he sees a group of three young women hanging out around a bench. Marlon can't see anyone else in the park. As he gets closer to the women, one of them stands out. She has a firm, curvy body and glowing skin. Marlon can feel the woman looking at him, seeking contact with his eyes.

"Hi, how are you doing?" she says in English.

"I'm good, thanks," says Marlon and continues walking. "How are you?"

"It's hot today," she says and puts her hand on her forehead.

"It sure is."

The woman steps out in front of him. "You are not French?" she says.

"No, I am not."

She smiles. "Where are you going?"

“Just having a look around,” he says. “Figured that I could find a bar or a café somewhere.”

“I know a great place,” she says. “You’d love it.”

“Cool. What’s it called?”

The woman hooks her arm in his. “C’mon, I’ll show you.”

The sudden move surprises Marlon, and he gets cautious.

“We go there together or not?” she asks, pulling Marlon’s arm.

“I’m sorry,” says Marlon. “I’m not looking for company.”

The woman pushes him away and swears in French. “Are you trying to insult me?” she says with a loud voice. “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to...”

She looks away and joins her friends again. “Go do whatever you want, pervert,” she says. “You want to find a hooker, go get yourself a hooker, but leave us alone.”

Marlon feels terrible, but trying to explain himself will only add to the awkwardness, he thinks. He swallows his pride and continues down the pathway through the park. A few blocks away, he reaches a livelier street filled with people and shops. At first, he feels like everyone is watching him and sizing him up. But after a while, he realizes that no one seems to care about the presence of his pale skin. They must be used to seeing white westerners, he thinks.

He visits a bar, grabs a fresh juice, and sits down to observe the people. He tries some small talk with the bartender, but the local accent gives him a hard time keeping up.

CROWD OF ONE

Around six in the evening, Marlon returns to the hotel. He takes a shower and dozes off for a moment.

Five minutes to eight, he is dressed up and waiting for Jacob down in the lobby.

Ten minutes later, Mark arrives with his driver in a black SUV.

Jacob still hasn't arrived.

Marlon calls Jacob's phone, but he doesn't pick up. He asks the welcome desk to call Jacob's room.

"Jacob," says Marlon through the phone. "I'm calling from the lobby. Mark is here to pick us up."

"I'm on my way," answers Jacob with a stressed voice. "I'll be down in a minute."

Marlon hangs up and sees a familiar face stepping out of the elevator. It's the attractive young woman from the park. Their eyes meet.

Before Marlon has the time to react, the young woman squinches her eyes and throws up her middle finger.

The woman behind the welcome desk gives Marlon a judgmental look, and he feels like someone just slapped him in the back of his head.

The young woman heads for the exit. Marlon wants to run after her, but he isn't sure why or what he would tell her. Instead, he ends up standing, speechless, still like a statue.

Moments later, Jacob steps out of the elevator. His hair is messy, and he has a boozy look in his eyes. "You good?" he asks Marlon. "Ready to go?"

Marlon swallows hard. "After you," he says and follows Jacob outside.

Inside the black SUV, Mark sits in the passenger seat and behind him sits a young skinny guy who carries two heavy

bags under his bloodshot eyes. Marlon sits down in the backseat between Jacob and the skinny guy.

"This is Dirk, my analyst," says Mark. "And this is David, our local driver."

They all introduce each other while David starts driving.

"So, where is this dinner taking place?" asks Marlon

"Marcory district," says Mark while tapping on his phone. "It's on the other side of the Lagoon."

"A lot of guests?" asks Marlon.

"Maybe a few hundred," says Mark. "I don't really know. We're just helping to foot the bill."

"What's your business down here?" asks Jacob.

"We're investing in the harbor," says Mark. "Once the next trade war starts, it will be a key asset."

"Good, you're in on the ground floor, then," says Marlon.

"It's the only place to be," says Mark.

"I thought the shipping business was going downhill," says Jacob.

"That's right," says Mark. "But trust me, a Dutchman from Rotterdam knows when a port makes sense or not. Ask Dirk, he was up all night hammering out the last details of the deal."

Dirk nods his head. "It's a good opportunity," he says.

"When are you guys going back?" asks Mark.

"Tomorrow," says Marlon. "What about you?"

"I need to be in London tomorrow, so we're going straight to the airport after the dinner," says Mark. "Don't worry, though; there will be plenty of cabs to take you back to the hotel."

After driving across the lagoon, they turn off the highway and continue through a residential area. The new

surroundings are visibly different than those in the neighborhood around their hotel. The roads are rougher, the houses are more primitive, and few streetlamps seem to work. Clusters of people are hanging around what looks to be spontaneous pop-up restaurants outside someone's kitchen or garage. The peculiar context makes Marlon feel like a lemon tree in northern Maine. He has no idea what would happen if they stopped the car and ventured outside, but something tells him that it would be a bad idea.

"Where the fuck are we?" asks Mark to David as he looks up from his phone.

"It's a shortcut," says David. "The highway is a mess at this hour."

After a few more blocks, they reach a construction sign placed in the middle of the road. David swears at it in French and stops the car to turn around.

Mark sighs and looks at his wristwatch.

"No problem," says David. "I know another way."

They drive back two blocks and take another road filled with empty buildings and deserted streets.

A nervous feeling sweeps through the car.

They turn a sharp corner. Two men appear in the middle of the street, and David stands on the brakes.

The men on the street look at them with bleary eyes before slowly moving towards the sidewalk. Marlon can sense something in the air. Something is off, he thinks.

The next second, two other men appear on each side of the car, grabbing on to the handles to the front doors. David instantly stamps on the gas pedal. The two men lose their grips and a brick drops to the ground. As the car accelerates into the intersection ahead, Marlon grabs on to

the two seats in front of him, lowering his head and preparing for the worst. But nothing happens.

The car slows down.

"Sorry about that," says David. "Normally, there's no problem."

Mark, who has a firm grip on the door handle, looks back at them with a shocked face. "You okay back there?" he asks.

They all confirm.

Marlon sits up and leans back against his seat.

Mark's shocked face turns into a bright smile, and he starts laughing. "Wow," he shouts. "How about that?"

Marlon turns to Jacob and expects him to be as taken by the situation as him. To his surprise, Jacob appears calm and almost unbothered.

"Are you good?" asks Marlon.

"Yeah," says Jacob. "I'm starving, though."

"C'mon now," says Marlon. "Don't act like that didn't shake you up?"

"Maybe a little," says Jacob. "But it's over now."

Marlon wonders if Jacob is drunker than he looks.

"Does that happen a lot?" Dirk asks David.

"Never," says David with a calm voice. "But it's good to have your doors locked. Just in case."

Dirk and Marlon look at each other, unsure how to interpret David's answer.

Mark is still smiling in the front seat, seemingly upbeat about the experience. Jacob is silently looking out through his window. It's a bizarre moment, thinks Marlon.

Soon after, they arrive in a more crowded and lit-up area. They continue down a neat and quiet street and park outside a simple one-story building that appears to be a

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restaurant. Two armed soldiers dressed in camouflage stand outside the entrance. As with most soldiers Marlon has seen in the city so far, their uniforms are of different colors. He starts wondering whether they are actual soldiers of the government or hired security guards.

Mark tells Marlon that he and Dirk need to dine with a few of their local business partners but that he will swing by their table before they leave.

Marlon and Jacob are seated at a round table with two men from China, two men from France, and two local men from *Côte d'Ivoire*. Marlon ends up sitting next to Jacob and a local man named Gregory. Jacob is quick to grab a wine bottle standing on the table and starts serving himself and the people around him.

Marlon tries to start a discussion with Gregory, but their conversation quickly dries up. The two French men keep to themselves on the other side of the table while Jacob chats up the Chinese.

Soon, the wine is flowing, and they are having a good time, mainly listening to Jacob as he works through anecdotes from his time living in Asia.

After the main course, Marlon starts feeling weird in his stomach. He declines the dessert and holds back on the drinks. Eventually, he resorts to the bathrooms to deal with the problem. When he returns, Mark is standing at their table discussing with Jacob, who by this time has consumed an entire bottle of wine by himself.

"Marlon," says Mark, "I was telling Jacob that I will get back to you the day after tomorrow."

"Sounds good," says Marlon. "We want to get things rolling as soon as possible."

“Great. So do we,” says Mark. “I need to leave. Dirk is already in the car.”

“You do that,” says Marlon. “We’ll stick around and hold down the fort.”

Mark shakes Marlon’s hand. “I’m looking forward to our collaboration,” he says. “Who knows, we might even be on to something bigger than we think.”

“Yes,” says Jacob loudly while looking up from his chair with a disturbingly drunk look in his eyes.

Marlon looks down at Jacob, who jerks his neck in preparation to speak. “Who knows,” says Jacob. “With all this smart propaganda and financial power, we might finally take over the world.”

“What?” asks Mark, confused.

Jacob clinches his fist in front of him. “The new world order. The Fourth Reich.” Jacob laughs.

“What are you talking about?” asks Mark.

“You know what I’m talking about,” says Jacob and picks up his glass.

“Okay,” says Marlon and tries to cut off the route to wherever Jacob is trying to go with his ambiguous comment.

Mark leans down and points his finger at Jacob. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re implying here, but my family lived in Rotterdam during the invasion in 1940. I have no patience arguing with a drunk Canadian brat like you, trying to act smart about something he has no clue about.”

Jacob looks up at Mark, swaying his drunk head from side to side. Just as he is about to speak, he is interrupted by his own burp.

Mark looks at Marlon. “What the fuck is this?”

CROWD OF ONE

“C’mon, I’ll walk you outside,” says Marlon to Mark, and the two of them head outside the restaurant. “He’s a great writer,” says Marlon. “When he gets drunk he likes to test people with his provocative thoughts. It’s his way to gather authentic material.”

“From me?” asks Mark.

“Jacob does this with everyone. But I agree, maybe he took it a bit too far tonight.”

“Whatever,” says Mark. “Frankly, I don’t care. As long as he’s doing his job and using that material to our advantage.”

“He will,” says Marlon.

“Good,” says Mark and gets into the black SUV. “I’ll get back to your boss and let him know that I appreciated our meeting and that we’ll continue ahead as planned.”

They say goodbye, and Marlon watches the car drive off. His stomach feels better, but he is starting to feel weak and tired. He sits down on a bench next to the entrance. The two soldiers stand nearby, smoking and discussing quietly with each other.

Marlon is relieved that Mark took it lightly. He probably understands that Jacob isn’t central to this thing. What’s more, Mark is too experienced to let some irrational comment get under his skin. That’s why he’s in charge, thinks Marlon. He doesn’t let emotions mess with his mind.

Although Jacob’s behavior could have cost them the entire deal, Marlon knows that it was a misunderstanding. Jacob didn’t want to fuck anyone over. He just wanted to confront the morality of the project, and Marlon gets that. Still, it wasn’t the time or the place. Then again, thinks Marlon, whenever or wherever is?

Marlon decides that Jacob's misstep won't find its way to LaFontaine's ears. It won't do anyone any good, he thinks. Jacob is a grown man, and he will deal with it in his own way.

A pickup truck comes driving down the quiet street and stops outside the restaurant. One of the armed soldiers leaves his position and walks up to the car. His colleague grips his automatic rifle with both hands.

Marlon sits still, his heart rate beginning to pick up speed.

A man in the car's passenger seat leans out and starts speaking with the soldier. The soldier responds, and then he swiftly throws up his hand and yells, "Get out here."

The other soldier takes another step forward.

Marlon prepares to throw himself down to the ground.

The men in the pickup truck laugh and drive away. The soldier walks back to his position. Nothing happened, and Marlon tells himself to relax.

When he returns inside, the two men from *Côte d'Ivoire* appear to have left. Jacob is still talking to the Chinese, and the two French men have moved over to join their discussion.

"How's it going?" asks Marlon as he sits down next to Jacob.

"We are about to order another round," says Jacob. "What do you want?"

"Honestly, I don't feel so good," says Marlon. "I think the shrimps messed with my stomach."

"Alright," says Jacob and waves over a waiter. "Five whiskeys and a glass of water," he says.

"Make that four whiskeys and two waters," says one of the French men.

CROWD OF ONE

Jacob leans in towards Marlon. "Are we good, though?" he asks.

"No problem, we're good," says Marlon. "Forget about the whole thing."

Jacob hits his fist against Marlon's shoulder. "I owe you one."

"No, you don't," says Marlon. "I get what you were trying to say. Don't worry about it. It's all good."

"I'm glad," he says. "That I'm not the only one."

"You can enjoy the evening," says Marlon. "We'll take a late flight back tomorrow night."

"Are you sure you don't want another drink?"

"I'm sure," says Marlon.

"Alright," says Jacob and turns to the others again. "I heard about a place not too far away from here, called Zone 4. Anyone heard of it?"

"Yes," says one of the French men. "It's only ten minutes away."

"Is it any good?" asks Jacob.

"They have a few bars and clubs."

"I'm sold," says Jacob. "Who's coming with me?"

The waiter arrives with their drinks.

"China, are you in?"

"Yes, yes," say the Chinese men, and they laugh.

"I'm in," says the French man who's drinking whiskey.

"Sure," says Marlon and drinks his water. He'd prefer to go straight back to the hotel, but he wouldn't feel right leaving Jacob on his own.

As the water passes through Marlon's throat, his stomach starts freaking out again. *Seriously*, he thinks, *is it not over yet?* He excuses himself and runs off to the restroom.

When he returns, the group's glasses are empty.

Jacob looks up at him. "How's it going there, chief?" he asks.

"It's better now," says Marlon.

"Go back to the hotel and get some rest," says Jacob. "I don't want my brother blaming me for not taking care of his best soldier."

"I'll share a cab," says the French man who ordered water. "We're staying at the same hotel."

"Go," says Jacob. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"We have a car and driver," says one of the Chinese men. "He takes us to the bar."

"Look at that," says Jacob. "Let's get one more for the road and then we are off."

Marlon and the French man, whose name is Yves, asks for a taxi and leave the restaurant.

The drive back to the hotel is calm and relaxing. Yves is on the phone, talking to his wife, while Marlon leans back in his seat, feeling happy to soon be in bed.

12

A Saturday evening, late August. The sun was orange, and the winds were lean. Most Parisians were still on holiday, leaving most of the city idle and asleep. Marlon and Mario had been working at Atlas Analytic for precisely two years.

Marlon looked down at the receipt. One thousand five hundred and sixty-five euros.

“It stings, I know,” said Mario. “Still, it’s half the retail price.”

“That’s alright,” said Marlon, putting the receipt in his pocket.

“It will be worth it,” said Mario. “You’ll keep it for a long time, and it looks great.”

“For sure.”

"He's a good tailor. But next year, we go to Italy. We'll make a trip out of it."

They put their new suits in the trunk of Mario's car.

"Did you find a buyer?" asked Marlon.

"I'll use a dealer. It will probably wipe out the profit, but it's worth not having to deal with all the paperwork."

"You'll be better off without it."

"I'm thinking about buying a scooter. Like the one I've got back home."

"Yeah?"

"It's better than sweating in the metro. I tell you that."

Marlon checks his watch. "We should hurry up. We're ten minutes late."

Mario smiles. "I'll bet ten euros none of them have arrived yet."

That evening, Marlon and Mario were having dinner with Isabelle and her boyfriend, Tom. They were meeting at a restaurant in St. German, close to the metro stop Odéon. Marlon likes this area. It has two different movies theaters and is only five minutes away from Jardin du Luxembourg, his favorite park in the city.

As Mario predicted, the two of them were first to arrive. They sat down at their table and ordered two Negroni.

"I'm breaking up with Olivia," said Marlon.

"Olivia?"

"You know, the girl I've been dating for the past two months."

"I thought you're were just being friends."

"Why did you think that?"

"I mean, you barely know her, right?"

"I don't want to pretend like we are going anywhere serious."

CROWD OF ONE

Mario nodded in agreement.

"How are things with Gia?" asked Marlon.

"Good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," said Mario, sipping his drink.

Marlon smiled. By now, he knew what it meant if Mario kept quiet about a girl.

"What?" said Mario. "What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing. I'm happy for you. That's all."

"Let's go and check out that Russian bar in Montmartre afterward."

"Sure," said Marlon and felt a vibration against his chest. He put down his drink and pulled out his phone. It was his mother calling him. "Mom," he answered.

His mother answered with a faraway-sounding voice.

"Hold on a second, I can't hear you," said Marlon and walked outside the restaurant. "Mom, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm good. What's up?"

"I wanted to write to you, but I forgot my password to that email you got me."

"I wrote it down in your black notebook where you keep all your passwords."

"Right, I forgot," she said. "I'll check it later."

A short pause followed, and Marlon could hear his mother stuttering on her breath.

"Mom, is everything alright?" he asked.

"Your father didn't want me to tell you, but I had to talk to someone," she said.

An uncomfortable feeling poured over Marlon. "Tell me what's going on," he said. "I won't tell him you told me. I promise."

"Please don't," she said. "It will only make things worse."

"Of course not," said Marlon and felt his stomach twisting into a knot.

"Your father is doing okay, but he was in a car accident yesterday. He got bruised up and hurt his back, but he's going to be fine. The hospital will keep him another day for observation. I hope he will be home by tomorrow."

"Mom, that's horrible," said Marlon. "What happened? Did someone hit him?"

"He crashed into a car parked next to the road. Thank god no one was in it."

"Is he going to be okay?"

"The doctors say he got lucky."

Marlon took a moment to let it sink in. "Why didn't he want you to tell me?" he asked. "Is he embarrassed about crashing into a parked car? I'm sure it was parked wrong, right?"

"I don't know," said his mother and paused. "You see..."

"Please don't tell me that he was—"

"Yes," said his mother before her voice broke down and she started crying. "The hospital had to call the cops, but they didn't have time to show up. We are still waiting for them to file a report, and we haven't heard anything from the owner of the other car yet."

Marlon sat down on the stairs. "What's the damage?" he asked. "Will the insurance cover it?"

"Your dad refuses to report it. He says that insurance won't cover it anyway. I think he's afraid that his employer will find out. You know that he's having a tough time right now."

CROWD OF ONE

"How drunk was he?"

"I don't know," she said. "It happened around midnight, and the hospital didn't call me until early in the morning. I was still asleep." His mother's voice broke again.

Marlon felt the anger building up inside of him, but he did his best to remain cool. His mother needed him to stay calm. "Everything is going to be alright," he said. "He got a bit bruised up, but he's going to be okay. Maybe this is good for him. It could be a wakeup call."

"I hope," she said, recovering her voice.

"Don't worry about the hospital bill. If there was no surgery, it shouldn't be too steep."

"I've already talked to them, and they can put us on a payment plan."

"What about the car?"

"It's wrecked."

Marlon knew that his mother was dependent on that car for getting to and from work. "We'll take care of that too. Don't worry about it."

"We've already mortgaged the house. There's nothing left in the savings account. I can't ask my cousin again. They have less than we do."

"I've got better credit than you. I'll be able to help out."

"No, I won't allow that—"

"Mom, please. I'm doing very well over here. What's more, you both got jobs. You'll get back on track in no time. Send me the bills, okay?"

"Marlon," she said, "this is not why I called you."

"I know," he said. "But I don't want you to get stuck in some stupid credit scheme that will make things worse. Dad doesn't have to know. Anyway, I know that he

stopped managing your budget years ago. He won't notice."

"Marlon," she said, "I—"

Marlon raised his voice. "Mom, it's not a big deal," he said. "We are not going to continue this discussion. Okay?"

His mother got quiet.

Marlon had never talked to his mother in that tone before. For a moment, he wondered if he pushed it too far. He waited a few more seconds.

"Okay," said his mother with a reluctant tone. "Only until I figure things out."

"Good," said Marlon and took a short pause. "How are you doing? How is everything at work?"

His mother took a deep breath and calmed down.

Apart from the situation with his father, his mother appeared to be well. She still enjoyed her work at the school, and she told Marlon that she had applied to volunteer at their town's local theatre.

"They'll pay me in tickets," she said. "But I don't care. I've always been curious to see what's going on backstage."

When they hung up, Marlon felt anger against his father. Then he thought about his new suit. That stupid suit. He figured that his mother needed between five to ten thousand dollars to cover the hospital bills and a down-payment for a new car. Money which Marlon surely didn't have.

Later that summer, Marlon had been asked to meet with LaFontaine at his office on the seventh floor.

On the day of the meeting, Marlon was wearing his new suit. Although he hated the hole it had burnt in his wallet, he loved how it felt on him. He had never owned any clothing that merged with his body's movements in such perfect relationship. It felt like wearing a tracksuit to work, he thought. It even felt like he was back in the pool, swimming without anything on.

"Walk right in," said Rita. "The door is open."

Marlon knocked gently on the door before entering.

LaFontaine looked up behind his desk. "Marlon," he said and smiled. "Come in. Sit down."

Marlon shook LaFontaine's hand and sat down in front of his desk.

"Good job with that Danish account," said LaFontaine. "It could be our ticket into Scandinavia."

"Once they heard that their main competitor was reaching out to meet with me, they signed on for a two-year exclusive. We'll start working on their strategy this week."

"Smart move," said LaFontaine.

Marlon nodded, feeling humble but proud.

"As you know," said LaFontaine, "growth is better than expected, but the margins are still tight. It's nothing to worry about, though. It has been anticipated, and we are well capitalized. Nonetheless, we are not like those blown-up unicorns out there. We still prioritize stability, laying low and flying under the radar. Our business model is highly sensitive to the evolutions of our environment. We need to move like Indians out there. Smooth and with confidence, knowing our battlefield before we attack."

“I understand,” said Marlon. “It’s the best approach for us.”

“Good,” said LaFontaine and opened an icebox next to his desk. He pulled out two glass bottles of Perrier and handed one to Marlon. “You and Mario did a hell of a good job last year.”

“Thanks.”

“You’ve been out there every week pounding the pavement. Trust me, I know how hard it is. Sneaking around, talking in code, trying to feed the shark without getting bit. It’s a tough gig, and it requires stamina. That’s what it all comes down to. Whatever you do and whatever you face. Your job, your relationships, your life. They will all test your stamina.”

Marlon nods and sips his water.

“I talked to Margaret,” said LaFontaine.

Margaret is Atlas Analytica’s chief financial officer.

Marlon felt a heatwave traveling across his back and chest. He had to leave his employment details when he applied for a cash loan last week. The credit company must have called Margaret, he thought. Then she must’ve talked to LaFontaine.

“Are you buying a car or something?” asked LaFontaine.

“No, or, yes. I am,” stuttered Marlon and looked away.

Why am I feeling so embarrassed? he thought. There was nothing to be embarrassed about. He was buying a car, so what?

“I thought you took the metro to work?” said LaFontaine.

“I do.”

“Are you moving outside the city?”

CROWD OF ONE

Marlon looked down at his feet. “No,” he said “The car is not for me. It’s for my parents, or my mother, back home.”

“I see,” said LaFontaine. “That’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I reacted like that.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

Marlon tried to regain his posture and looked up at LaFontaine.

“I know where you are right now,” said LaFontaine. “I can relate. And I know that there are offers out there. If it weren’t for our outrageous costs on legal advice, we would have a lot more cash to channel into your pocket. Believe me, I want to.”

Marlon remained silent. He didn’t know what to say. He never intended to begin a discussion about his compensation.

LaFontaine stood up and walked around his desk, one hand in his pocket and the other gripping his chin. Marlon could tell that he was preparing for a speech.

“To do what we do requires a robust foundation,” said LaFontaine. “As pioneers, we are doomed to break the ice for everyone else. We have to see it as an investment. Yes, the initial price tag is high, but you will be rewarded accordingly. And I’m not only talking about money here. That’s why we don’t turn to external capital, because nobody understands the fair value of the company. Today, we are still in the trenches, but we are gaining serious ground. We have to fight it out a little longer. You understand this, right?”

“Of course,” said Marlon. “We are laying the foundation. Doing the dirty work.”

“The day when we open the books, people who have worked hard and maintained their loyalty will be well taken care of.”

“I understand that,” said Marlon.

“Let me make you an offer,” said LaFontaine.

“Please,” said Marlon. “I’m not asking for anything.”

“I’ll pay you ten thousand dollars to take care of your situation back home. But you need to promise to stick around and fight for us another year. What do you say?”

Marlon looked at LaFontaine, trying to read his eyes.

“Look,” said LaFontaine, “I’ll pay you this sum off the books. It’s not going into your pocket but to your family. It’s the same, but it’s different.”

“Still,” said Marlon, “I can’t let you do that.”

“I’m not doing this to buy a favor from you, Marlon. I’m doing this because I need your head to be straight. I don’t want you to stack up pointless debt that will only balloon with time. Credit is for deadbeats. But not only that, you’re a great producer, and you deserve this. Still, we’re a team here, and our goal is long term.”

“I know, and I agree,” said Marlon. “I can pay you back.”

“This is not a loan,” said LaFontaine. “I told you, you’ve earned it.”

Marlon kept quiet.

“Give me a U.S.-based account number,” said LaFontaine. “I’ll transfer the money locally. In that way, the money can be treated as a gift and won’t affect your personal finances. You understand?”

Marlon nodded.

“Again, this is not a gift or a loan. You tell your parents that the money comes directly from you. Is that clear?”

CROWD OF ONE

“It’s clear,” said Marlon. “Thank you.”

Lafontaine sat down behind his desk. “This doesn’t change anything. It is what it is. We don’t have to talk about it again.”

13

Marlon wakes up at dawn. He has slept through the night like a log, and he feels rested and clearheaded. In contrast to last night, his empty stomach is now craving for breakfast.

He gets out of bed, stretches his body, and walks over to the window. The rising sun reflects itself against the still water across the lagoon.

There is no need to sync the day with Jacob, he thinks. He probably needs half a day to sleep off last night.

Marlon calls room service and orders the biggest breakfast on the menu.

“Thirty minutes, Sir.”

“You know what,” he says. “Forget about it. I’ll eat in the restaurant.”

He takes a quick shower and hurries downstairs.

CROWD OF ONE

While pouring his coffee, he goes through what needs to be done for the day. He only needs to write a summary to LaFontaine and answer a few urgent requests from R&D. He can finish all that before noon, he thinks.

After breakfast, Marlon walks by the welcome desk to arrange for a late checkout for him and Jacob. He sends Jacob a text, informing him that they can keep their rooms until four o'clock. Then he camps out at a quiet corner of the hotel bar and gets to work.

A few hours later, the sky darkens outside. Heavy raindrops begin to smash hard against the windows, and soon the whole sky opens up.

Marlon wraps up his work and takes a seat next to the windows facing the lagoon. He orders a coffee and kicks back.

The rainy weather creates an exotic and tranquil atmosphere outside. Marlon sits in silence and digs deep into his own thoughts. He thinks about his parents. Had he left them when they needed him the most? His father had always been there for his grandparents. Even when his mother refused to see them. His father had never turned to Marlon for help. Marlon always thought it was because of pride, but perhaps his father didn't bother. Maybe his expectations were too low. Marlon had never truly stood up for his father. He had never shown him that he would be there no matter what. Instead, he had run away and barely looked back.

A cold chill travels through Marlon's body. *This isn't the time*, he thinks. *Get a hold of yourself.*

Marlon picks up his phone and calls Jacob. No answer. It's past noon. Jacob must still be sleeping, he thinks. Fair enough.

He asks the waiter to recommend a good lunch restaurant. He gets an address to an establishment nearby.

Outside, the air smells of earth mixed with wet concrete. It's warmer than yesterday and Marlon can feel his body preparing for a heavy sweat. *Whatever*, he thinks, and lets it go. He will have time to shower before they leave.

Marlon returns to the hotel around half past three. Back in his room, he calls Jacob again. No answer. He packs his stuff and heads down to the lobby. He asks the welcome desk to call Jacob's room. No answer. He then takes the elevator and knocks on Jacob's door. No response. He calls Jacob's phone again and puts his ear against the door. Not a sound. Marlon's mind starts to spin. Where the heck is he?

Marlon goes back to the welcome desk and asks them to call Yves, the French man he shared a taxi with last night.

Yves tells Marlon that his colleague's name is Pascal and gives him his phone number.

"I left with the Chinese around three o'clock in the morning," says Pascal. "Jacob said he would grab a cab."

"By himself?"

"Probably not," says Pascal. "He had some company when we left."

"Yeah, who?"

Pascal chuckles. "Don't worry. I'm sure Jacob went to the wrong hotel. Maybe not by mistake, if you know what I mean."

"Alright," says Marlon. "Let me know if you hear from him, okay?"

They hang up, and Marlon feels both reassured and annoyed. Jacob might be sleeping it off and is too hungover to answer his phone.

CROWD OF ONE

They planned to leave for the airport at seven thirty, so there's still time.

Marlon extends Jacob's late checkout, walks back to the restaurant, and orders a cold beer. It has stopped raining, and the hazy afternoon light has begun to settle over the lagoon.

Two beers and a short snooze later, the sun has started to set. It's almost seven o'clock.

Marlon tries Jacob's phone again. No answer.

If Jacob hasn't shown up by now, thinks Marlon, he probably won't, and he is going to miss their flight.

Marlon walks over to the welcome desk again. He informs a manager about his situation and asks them to check Jacob's room. Twenty minutes later, the manager returns. He tells Marlon that the room is empty except for Jacob's luggage.

Marlon calls LaFontaine.

"I think I know what this is," says LaFontaine through the phone. "Extend his room for another night. Pay the hotel for a few more meals, leave Jacob a note, and get yourself to the airport."

"I could stay," says Marlon. "What if something has happened to him?"

"Listen, Jacob is on a bender. It's not for you to worry about. I'll handle it."

"Alright, whatever you say. But it doesn't feel right leaving him behind."

"We can't let this affect our work," says LaFontaine. "I need you back here by tomorrow. Let me deal with Jacob."

"Understood," says Marlon. "I'm on my way."

After a sleepless night on the plane, Marlon returns to Paris around seven o'clock in the morning the following day. From the airport, he goes straight to the office and up to the seventh floor.

"Has he heard anything?" Marlon asks Rita.

"I don't know," she says. "But he wants to talk to you. The door is open."

Marlon enters LaFontaine's office.

LaFontaine sits behind his desk with a phone against his ear. "Let me know the moment you hear something," he says and hangs up.

"Anything new?" asks Marlon.

"Nothing from the hotel, but they found his phone at the bar."

"The bar I told you about?"

"Yes, behind a couch or something. The person I spoke to didn't work that night, so they couldn't give me any info. I've also talked to the French guy, Pascal, and one of the Chinese men. They all say the same thing. That Jacob insisted on staying when they all left."

"What about the police?"

"I've contacted the embassy. Both the French and the Canadian. They've each filed a report with the local police. They can't do much more."

"What do you think?"

LaFontaine sighs. "The bar is in the red-light district of Abidjan," he says. "How drunk was he when you left?"

"He was refreshed, but not that he couldn't handle himself."

"He better not be squatting in a shack somewhere, shooting shit up his arm."

CROWD OF ONE

Marlon didn't know that about Jacob. "Has it happened before?" he asks.

"He has a history. But never the heavy stuff." LaFontaine picks up a cigarette and walks over to the window. "If we don't hear anything, I'll fly down there tonight."

"I'll go with you," says Marlon.

LaFontaine turns around. "I appreciate that, but I need you here."

"I'm serious," says Marlon.

LaFontaine lights up his cigarette. "I know you are, but you stay here. End of discussion."

Marlon nods. "And the meeting?" he asks.

"Ten o'clock. Mark will call in on speakerphone. I will be a few minutes late, but you start without me."

"Alright," says Marlon.

"Also," says LaFontaine and walks over to Marlon. "Call Sofia. We need to bring her up to speed." He hands Marlon a piece of paper with her name and a phone number.

"How much does she know?"

"Only the broad strokes."

"Have you met her?"

"I've talked to her briefly on the phone. Bright and alert. She's young, like you."

"Is she vetted?"

"Beatrice has signed off on her contract. It's all done."

"Alright," says Marlon and looks at the note. "I'll reach out to her right away."

"Good," says LaFontaine and leans out of the window. "Feel her out a bit. See how comfortable she seems with the topic. You know the drill."

Down on the fifth floor, Marlon is greeted by twenty empty desks. Most of them must still be in Milan, he thinks, and rolls his luggage across the soft gray carpet back to his desk. When he hangs up his coat, he looks down at the generous space behind his chair and the wall. He could lie down and have a quick nap, he thinks. Nobody will notice.

He docks his computer and googles the phrases “Sofia Pereira” and “freelance writer.” The results include a light LinkedIn profile without a photo and a string of articles written in Portuguese.

Marlon browses through the results and dials Sofia’s number on his phone. Most of her articles are short and published on a variety of local news sites. None of them are familiar to Marlon.

Sofia answers after the first signal. “Óla,” she says, loud and clear.

“Hi, my name is Marlon Renner, I work with Jacob Laroy at Atlas Analytica.”

“Hi,” she says. “Jacob has told me about you.”

“Great,” says Marlon. “Have you spoken to him recently?”

“Not in a few days. We talked before he left for Abidjan.”

Marlon hesitates, deciding whether he should tell her about the situation with Jacob. He doesn’t know anything about their relationship. It’s too early, he thinks. “I’ve been told that you are going to work with us on an upcoming project,” he says.

“Yes, that’s how I understand it,” says Sofia. “Assuming it’s still on, of course.”

"It is," he says. "At least the pilot phase."

"Great."

Marlon takes a moment to remind himself of the purpose of his call. "Right," he says. "The pilot phase will be launched next week, meaning that we want to get everyone up to speed as soon as possible. Ahem... How much do you know about the project?"

"I know about Paulsen's report, and that the mission is to help communicate its message."

"What do you know about Atlas Analytica?"

"That you specialize in these kinds of things."

"What things?"

"Running campaigns that use psychometrics."

"Right," says Marlon. "Well, Jacob gave you a strong recommendation, so we are excited to have you on the team."

"I'm happy to get involved."

Marlon's fatigued mind begins to fade out. *What was the purpose of this call again?*

"So..." says Sofia. "What's our next step?"

"In fact," says Marlon, "we're having our first meeting with the client today at ten. Are you able to phone in?"

"Sure."

"Good. I'll text you the number. You don't have to say anything. Only listen and take notes."

"I can do that."

"Afterward, we deal with the logistics. When can you be in Paris?"

"I'm in Madrid right now, finishing an assignment," she says. "I can be in Paris by tomorrow evening or the day after that."

“Sounds good,” says Marlon, stopping himself from yawning. “Look, I need to go now. Let’s talk more after the ten o’clock call, okay?”

“Okay.”

They finish the call and hang up. Marlon rolls up a sweater and places it on the floor behind his desk.

Hours later, a few minutes before ten o’clock, Marlon sits at the large meeting table in LaFontaine’s office. Next to him sit Arielle and Louis from R&D. They are the core team involved in the Greek project. Arielle is a rigorous and straightforward, thirty-something data scientist, and Louis is an introverted and soft-spoken, forty-something psychiatrist.

As planned, Sofia dials into the speakerphone and Marlon introduces her to Arielle and Louis.

“Should I introduce myself to the client?” asks Sofia over the speakerphone.

“There’s no need for that now,” says Marlon. “Just mute your phone and listen in. I will clarify things for you after the call.”

“Okay,” says Sofia, and she mutes her phone.

“Should we wait for the boss?” asks Louis.

“He told us to get started without him,” says Marlon.

At precisely ten o’clock, Mark Huber dials in and the call starts. Marlon takes the lead and runs a quick summary before he outlines their objectives.

Arielle and Louis follow by breaking down their simulations and proposed strategy. Mark cuts them off short. As in the meeting with Marlon, Mark has little interest in pondering over the details.

“Go ahead as planned,” says Mark.

LaFontaine enters the room and leans over the speakerphone. "Mark," he says, "you're going to love this. I've managed to add some extra fuel to the campaign. But it needs your approval to add an additional subcontractor."

"Alright," says Mark. "What is it?"

"It's hard to explain over the phone," says LaFontaine. "It's about bots, online, driven by artificial intelligence."

"Is it legal?" asks Mark.

"Of course. At least the way we will use them."

"No downside risks?"

"Worst-case scenario is that someone traces them back to us. Then we have to explain why."

"If we contract through a separate corporation, there will be no traces, right?" says Mark.

"In theory, that's correct," says LaFontaine.

"Our interests are aligned," says Mark. "Do whatever you think is best."

"Alright," says LaFontaine. "The pilot phase starts on Monday. We'll show you the results by the end of the week."

They say goodbye, and Mark disconnects from the call.

"What the hell," says Arielle and looks at LaFontaine. "Do you mind mentioning this to us before we sell it to the client?"

"Relax," says LaFontaine. "There was no time. I just set it up."

"Is this even legal?" asks Arielle. "I thought the new privacy laws prohibited these types of bots?"

"I ran it with our lawyers, and it's basically legal," says LaFontaine.

"Basically?" asks Arielle.

“It is legal,” says LaFontaine. “You know how this works.”

Arielle looks at Louis and Marlon.

“If it’s legal, it’s legal,” says Marlon looking at the others around the table. “Tell us more about these bots,” he asks LaFontaine.

“Alright, this is how it works,” says LaFontaine. “The bot contractor’s operations are set up outside the European Union. They will have no connections with Atlas Analytica or anyone working here. Their bots will merely use algorithms engineered against our strategy. All data will be encrypted and cannot be traced back to us.”

“What’s their design?” asks Arielle.

“This is no high-quantity, low-quality operation,” says LaFontaine. “These bots look and act like real humans. They’ve got social media profiles with photos, status updates, and commentary dating back for years. Some have even entered into online relationships with real people. I’m serious, it’s incredible. You almost can’t tell the difference.”

“Can you show us?” asks Arielle.

LaFontaine takes out his laptop. He opens a secured demo page that illustrates how the bots are created and how they act online. The bots’ activities follow specific time zones and their social media accounts are interconnected. They all have unique physical appearances and appear on each other’s photos.

“This is quite impressive,” says Arielle. “How many of these do they operate?”

“I’m not sure,” says LaFontaine. “A few thousand, maybe a million. I don’t know yet. But it’s not like those other garbage bots out there. This is the real deal.”

“Can these bots mess up our own algorithms?” asks Louis.

“It depends,” says Arielle. “As long as they aren’t registered citizens, they can’t infiltrate our core database. But they do definitely interact with our campaigns.”

“If that’s true,” says Marlon. “We can’t afford to not cooperate with these guys. If nothing else, we need the knowledge.”

“How do we activate the partnership?” asks Arielle.

“We only need to hand them our strategy,” says LaFontaine. “Then they would continue operating independently.”

“What do they need?” asks Arielle.

“They’ve sent me a template,” says LaFontaine. “But I want to deliver it to them in person, at their site, to validate the legitimacy of their operations. After that, we can set up a live feed of some kind.”

“Where are they based?” asks Marlon.

“I’ll find out as soon as I confirm the deal,” says LaFontaine and slides a USB stick across the table to Arielle. “In the meantime, upload the required data into the template. Marlon will handle the delivery.”

Everyone nods their heads in agreement.

“Also,” says LaFontaine, “I think it goes without saying that this small detail stays between us four. There is no need for anyone else to know.”

Arielle and Louis stare nervously at Marlon.

“What?” asks LaFontaine.

Marlon swallows hard and leans towards the speakerphone. “Sofia?” he asks while meeting LaFontaine’s blank stare. Both Arielle and Louis sink down in their chairs.

Sofia unmutes her phone and says, "Yes, I'm here."

"Did you get all of that?" asks Marlon while trying to keep a steady voice.

"Yes, I did," says Sofia.

"Great," says LaFontaine. "Can you come to Paris tonight?"

"No," she says. "But I can be there by tomorrow evening."

"She is in Madrid," says Marlon.

LaFontaine sighs. "We'll get back to you, Sofia. Take care."

Sofia disconnects from the call.

"For fuck's sake," yells LaFontaine. "She is not under contract yet."

"I didn't know that," says Marlon.

"Go to Madrid, tonight," says LaFontaine and stares at Marlon. "Make sure she gets on the same page."

"Alright," says Marlon. "I'll go."

LaFontaine turns to Arielle. "Fill up that USB right away and hand it to Marlon. He will deliver it after he is done in Madrid."

"Sure," says Arielle.

They all stand up and leave the office.

Marlon stops in the doorway. "Should I tell her about Jacob?" he asks.

"Of course," says LaFontaine. "Why would that be a secret?"

"I was just thinking," says Marlon. "I don't know what type of relationship they have."

LaFontaine shakes his head and looks down at his computer screen. "Wake up, Marlon."

CROWD OF ONE

“I’m sorry,” says Marlon. “I thought it would bring her up to speed.”

“Just go there and have her sign the contract,” says LaFontaine. “We need her to be under contract, okay?”

“I will.”

“Good. Close the door on your way out.”

14

Marlon lands at Madrid-Barajas airport at six o'clock.

He is meeting with Sofia at seven thirty inside a café next to the opera house, on Cuesta Santo Domingo. Despite solid recommendations from Jacob, LaFontaine takes no risks. Everyone involved with Atlas Analytica's projects needs to sign a nondisclosure agreement. No exceptions are made.

Marlon enters the backseat of a taxi. "How's the traffic?" he asks.

The driver points at his wristwatch. "Traffic, you know."

"Continue on the M-30 all the way behind the Palacio," says Marlon. "Let's stay away from the city."

"Will do," says the driver and looks at him through the rearview mirror. "American?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Idaho?"

CROWD OF ONE

"No, Maine," says Marlon. "The other side of the country."

"You like Idaho?"

"Wouldn't know. Never been there."

"I lived there for two years, you know," says the driver and holds up two fingers in the air. "When I was like you. You know, young."

"Sounds good," says Marlon.

"I had a job and a car. I rented a small apartment outside Boise, the city, you know?"

"Sure."

"It was a nice apartment."

Marlon nods.

"I tried to find a cabin," says the driver. "But you know."

The driver turns quiet and strokes his hand against his neck.

Marlon enjoys the silence for a moment. "Did you find one?" he asks.

"What?" asks the driver.

"A cabin. Did you find one?"

"No, I had to leave. No visa, you know."

"I see."

"Only illegals, you know. Or criminals. No Europeans."

"You need a good lawyer."

"You mean money?" says the driver and smiles.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Like the song. Abba, you know?"

"Right," says Marlon and looks out his window.

"Long flight?"

"Yeah."

"You relax," says the driver, and he begins fiddling with his radio. "I'll wake you when we arrive."

Marlon rests his head against the seat.

Forty minutes later, they arrive at his hotel.

Marlon drops off his bag and walks down the street to the café where he is meeting Sofia. He is early. A handful of people are inside. Marlon scans their faces.

In the back, against the wall, sits a young brunette staring straight into his eyes. Marlon stares back. The young brunette looks away and takes a sip from her teacup. It must be Sofia, he thinks and walks towards her.

"Sofia?" he asks.

"Yes," she says and looks up at him with bright green eyes.

They shake hands, and Marlon sits down in front of her.

Sofia is wearing a black turtleneck and blue jeans. Her hair is wavy, and her facial features are well defined.

"That went fast," she says.

"Thanks for taking your time," says Marlon. "I hope it won't mess up your schedule."

"Only a bit," she says and smiles.

"So, you are in Madrid for work?"

"Nothing big," she says. "I'm writing a piece for a Portuguese newspaper. The travel section."

"Sounds interesting."

"By the way," she says. "I can't reach Jacob. Do you know where he is?"

"About that," says Marlon and sits up straight. "We think that he is still in Abidjan. "

Sofia looks confused. "What do you mean?"

"We aren't sure. He won't answer his phone."

"He told me he was going there with you?"

"Yes, we were. But Jacob never showed up for the flight back."

CROWD OF ONE

"I don't understand," says Sofia; she shrugs. "Did something happen to him?"

"We don't know that," says Marlon. "He went to a bar on Monday evening, and we think he overslept and missed the plane."

"Have you tracked his phone?"

"I think so."

"You think?" says Sofia, looking at him suspiciously.

"Believe me," says Marlon. "Everyone is taking this very seriously. The police, the embassy. Everyone has been informed. I'm sure we will hear from him soon."

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"That's alright," says Marlon. "I probably came off as cold. I barely slept last night."

Sofia takes a deep breath. "So did Jacob go to a bar by himself?"

"Three other people went with him."

"Not you?"

"I was sick at the hotel, unfortunately."

Sofia nods.

"Look," says Marlon. "I don't know what type of relationship you and Jacob have, and you don't have to reveal anything to me. All Jacob has said is that you are a great person and a great writer and that we are lucky to have you on our team. That's why I'm here. To make sure you have the support you need to continue with our project. Then, when Jacob is back on track, everyone can hit the ground running."

"I understand," she says.

"If there's anything you need or if you have any questions, that's why I'm here. That's why I came out here to meet you in person."

"Thanks," says Sofia, warming her hand on the teacup.
"Actually, this isn't the first time."

"First time what?"

"That he disappeared like that."

Marlon keeps quiet.

"Once in Lisbon," says Sofia, "Jacob went to a bar, and I didn't hear from him for two days."

"What happened?"

Sofia shrugs her shoulders. "I don't know. He was just gone."

"He didn't tell you where he went?"

Sofia shakes her head. "I got upset, of course. But he didn't seem to understand why."

"Jacob's brother is going down there tonight."

"That's the boss, no? The one who forced you on the next flight to come and see me."

Marlon looks away. "Well—"

"I wasn't supposed to hear that call, was I?"

"It depends on how you look at it."

"It depends on whether I know how those bots operate, you mean?"

"Do you?"

"I do."

"There is nothing illegal about it," says Marlon. "You know that, right?"

"Maybe."

"It's the way it works these days. It's just an approach. We need to adapt to our circumstances."

Sofia leans forward. "Don't worry," she says. "I'm on your side. To be honest, I was more surprised that those bots weren't already part of your strategy."

"So, we are on the same page?"

CROWD OF ONE

Sofia offers a slight smile. "Now you realize that we could've done this over the phone."

"We prefer to deal face-to-face," he says. "You'll notice."

"So, what do I have to sign?"

"Do you have a fingerprint scanner on your phone?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Then I will email it to you. Once you sign off, it has an immediate effect."

"Should I do it now?"

"Why not," says Marlon and pulls out his phone. "Afterward, we can grab something to eat. I can give you more details of the project."

"Sure."

Marlon sends Sofia the contract. "Take your time," he says and stands up, nodding towards the restroom. "I'll be right back."

When he returns, Sofia has her coat on. "I know a place," she says. "It's simple but the food is great, and it's not very expensive."

"Let's do it," says Marlon and puts on his coat.

Leaving the café, Sofia leads them towards the Palacio Real de Madrid.

The air is fresh but cold, probably around forty degrees.

"How did you meet Jacob?" asks Marlon.

"I applied for a job at the *Economic Times*," she says. "He became my sponsor during the recruitment process."

"How did it go?"

She smiles and shakes her head. "I didn't get it."

"I used to study in London, and I had classmates who would murder to work there."

"I wouldn't take it that far," says Sofia. "I don't think I fit their profile."

"What profile?"

"I think Jacob used me to challenge the recruitment process. To push for someone with an alternative background."

"What background is that?"

"I used to be a high school teacher."

"Really?" says Marlon. "What subjects?"

"English and Mathematics."

"Why did you quit?"

"I had always dreamt of being a journalist. After two years of teaching, I decided to give it a try."

"Good for you."

"I might go back to teaching one day."

"You should," says Marlon. "We all should."

Sofia looks up at him, smiling. "Anyhow," she says. "After I was rejected by *Economic Times*, Jacob and I kept in touch. He helped me get set up as a freelancer."

"What type of jobs do you do?"

"I would like to do more local journalism."

"But you don't?"

"Haven't you heard? Local news is dead," says Sofia sarcastically.

"I guess," says Marlon.

"Like you said, we need to adapt to our circumstances, right?"

"Right, I did say that," says Marlon and smiles back.

"What about you," she says. "How did you end up all the way over here?"

"Opportunity."

"The opportunity to work at Atlas Analytica?"

“It’s a good firm. Great growth. Innovative people. Yes, it was a great opportunity.”

“It must be,” she says. “To move so far away from your family, I mean.”

“Well,” says Marlon and takes a deep breath. “Honestly, when I moved to Europe, I didn’t know about Atlas Analytica.” Then, on instinct, he tells her the story he usually keeps to himself. He explains that all started when he had his heart broken in high school. That he had felt like shit and wanted to run somewhere far away. For some reason, he doesn’t care if the story makes him appear weak and vulnerable. He just feels like being honest. Maybe it’s because he is tired and his mind is exhausted. He doesn’t really know. But right now, he doesn’t care. Telling the truth makes him feel good.

Moments later, they arrive in a dark alley paved with cobblestones. The alley is lit up by an old plastic sign hanging above a modest entrance.

Sofia walks up to the entrance and opens the door. “In here,” she says.

Behind the door hides a small restaurant with a modest interior and mostly elderly guests. When Marlon and Sofia step inside, everyone turns around with a curious look.

They sit down next to an old couple. Marlon catches the old woman looking at Sofia for a long moment. The old woman’s face turns into a warm smile. She says something to Sofia in Spanish and Sofia responds with a soft and polite tone. The old woman shakes Sofia’s hand and strokes it with her thumb.

“I didn’t know you spoke Spanish,” says Marlon.

“Not perfectly,” says Sofia.

“What did she say?”

“That I remind her of her daughter.”

Marlon leans back in his chair, somewhat taken by the old woman’s act.

Sofia picks up a laminated menu written in Spanish. “I came here the first time when I was ten years old,” she says. “The menus are still the same.”

“How long ago was that,” asks Marlon.

“About four years ago.”

Marlon lifts his eyebrows.

Sofia smiles. “It was nineteen years ago.”

“I was just about to say that you look older than your age.”

“But now you take it back?”

Marlon smiles. “I prefer to think in decades,” he says. “One is either in her twenties, thirties, or forties and so on. The years in-between don’t say much.”

They order food and continue to talk. When the discussion steers into work, Marlon realizes that Sofia is already well-read on Atlas Analytica and what they do.

“I’m impressed,” he says. “Seems like Jacob has already taught you everything you need to know.”

“He helped me prepare,” she says. “He gave me a list of books, articles, and specific cases to study.”

LaFontaine is going to like her, thinks Marlon. She soaks up information like a dry sponge.

Towards the end of their meal, LaFontaine calls Marlon on his phone. Marlon picks up immediately.

“Beatrice just confirmed Sofia’s contract,” says LaFontaine. “Well done.”

“Alright,” says Marlon. “Anything new on Jacob?”

CROWD OF ONE

“Yes, they’ve found his clothes and bank cards. All packed in a plastic bag and dumped somewhere outside the city.”

Marlon’s heart starts traveling up his throat, and he begins feeling light-headed. He swallows hard and looks down at his plate. “What does that mean?” he asks.

“We don’t know,” says LaFontaine. “There was no blood or signs of distress. Could be a robbery. Or worse, a kidnapping.”

Marlon puts his head in his hand. “What do we do now?”

“I’m at the airport now. I will be in Abidjan by tomorrow morning.”

“What can I do?” asks Marlon.

“Sit tight and don’t mention this to anyone. If this is a kidnapping situation, we need to be in control.”

“I’m with Sofia right now,” says Marlon. “We’re having dinner.”

“You can tell her but make sure she understands that we need to keep quiet about this until we know more.”

“Of course,” says Marlon.

“About the bot contractor,” says LaFontaine. “I’ll have their location by tomorrow. Stay in Madrid and try to get some sleep.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“I got to go now. Talk to you tomorrow.”

They hang up, and Marlon looks up at Sofia.

“Was that about Jacob?” she asks.

“Yes, they’ve found his clothes and bank cards in a plastic bag outside the city.”

Sofia puts her hands over her mouth.

"There were no signs of distress," says Marlon. "It could be a robbery or a kidnapping. We don't know anything yet."

"Was that his brother?"

"Yes, he is going to Abidjan tonight. He told me that it's important that we keep this information to ourselves until we know more. If this is a kidnapping, we need to be in control."

"I need some fresh air," says Sofia and heads towards the door.

Marlon stays seated. His body feels heavy and paralyzed. He tries to find a rational explanation, but he keeps picturing Jacob with a black hood over his head. He looks up and sees the old couple staring suspiciously at him. He gets up and walks outside.

Sofia stands against the wall with her arms crossed.

Marlon walks up next to her. "I know, this is surreal," he says. "But let's not jump to any conclusions."

"I don't even know him that well," she says.

Marlon leans in next to her. "I thought you two were more than friends," he says.

Sofia looks at him and shakes her head. "Just friends," she says. "Nothing more."

"Do you know any of his other friends?"

"No," she says. "I don't know anyone else who knows him."

"He must have friends back in Berlin, right?"

Sofia shrugs her shoulders. "I don't know."

They stand silently for a while, watching the smoke from their breath rise towards the dark sky.

"Where are you staying?" asks Marlon.

"I'm renting a room five minutes from here."

CROWD OF ONE

"I'll walk with you," he says.

"That's not necessary. You're tired. You should get back to your hotel."

"Let's go inside and grab our coats."

Back at their table, the old woman asks Sofia something.

"Family emergency," says Sofia.

"Oh," says the old woman and gives both her and Marlon a supporting look.

Marlon pays for the dinner and collects the receipt.

They walk together to Sofia's address and stop on the sidewalk outside. It's an old apartment building opposite Catedral de la Almudena.

"I know we shouldn't speculate," says Marlon. "Maybe Jacob followed someone home and then his things got stolen while he was asleep. Perhaps he woke up far outside the city with no clothes, phone, or money. It could take him days to get back."

"Yes, maybe," says Sofia.

"When is your flight back to Lisbon?"

"Tomorrow evening."

"We should meet at my hotel tomorrow morning. To see if we have any news about Jacob."

"Yes," she says.

"Okay," says Marlon. "We should try to get some sleep now." He holds out his hand. "It was nice to meet you," he says. "And I look forward to working together."

"Me too," she says and shakes his hand.

Marlon watches Sofia enter the building. Then he goes straight back to his hotel.

The following morning, Marlon receives a request from the local police in Abidjan. They ask him to leave a written statement about his last contacts with Jacob. He is ordered to fax the statement to them immediately.

Standing in the lobby, he watches his statement being fed into the hotel's fax machine. Marlon can't remember having used a fax machine in the last ten years. He was lucky that the hotel still had one.

Afterward, he returns to the hotel's restaurant, where Sofia has joined him for breakfast.

"Did you send it?" asks Sofia as Marlon sits down opposite her.

"I believe so," says Marlon. "You had a question about the campaign?"

"Yes, I was thinking," she says. "How are we going to sustain this once we start scaling the campaign to all these different countries?"

"Once the pilot campaign has convinced the client that it's working, we'll expand the team of writers."

"From where?"

"We have a pool of freelancers that we've built up over the years," says Marlon. "It all depends on the client and what type of project we are working on. We contract people with skills that match our themes and strategy."

Sofia nods her head. "Like Jacob and me?"

"Right," he says.

"What about languages?"

"Translators."

"That's it?"

"Yes, it's not too complicated. You research, you write, you feed the machine, and out it goes. Then you monitor the progress and add content as you go."

CROWD OF ONE

“And with the help of those bots, it’s going to pick up speed even faster, right?”

“That’s the idea,” says Marlon.

Sofia nods.

“You’ll see how it plays out,” he says. “Our in-house psychologists say that it’s in our DNA to follow the crowd and seek homogeneity. They say that it lays in our biological quest for survival. They call it the soul of the wolf and the fear of loneliness.”

“Do you believe in that?”

“We often think that we go against the pack when joining an opposition group. But the fact is that we simply join another pack. We don’t like to admit it, but we seldom express our true individual thoughts. It’s too risky, and it’s usually not worth it.”

A waiter arrives to refill their coffee, and the table begins to vibrate. It’s LaFontaine calling and Marlon answers straight away.

“Did you send your statement?” asks LaFontaine.

“Just faxed it,” says Marlon.

“Good.”

“Anything new?”

“No. Are you alone?”

“I’m having breakfast with Sofia.”

“Great. Let me talk to her.”

Marlon hands Sofia his phone.

Sofia puts the phone to her ear. At first, her face looks tense. Then she loosens up and breaks out into a smile. She opens her mouth and starts speaking in Portuguese. Marlon had no idea LaFontaine spoke Portuguese.

A few minutes later, Sofia hands back the phone. “He wants to speak to you,” she says.

"I didn't know you speak Portuguese?" says Marlon to LaFontaine.

"My wife is Brazilian."

Marlon wouldn't know. He has never met LaFontaine's wife or two kids.

"Listen," says LaFontaine. "We cannot put the whole project on ice while we wait for Jacob to show up. As the pilot campaign starts, we need to secure a team of writers as soon as possible. With Jacob gone, Maybe Sofia could help oversee the process. Do you think she's up for it?"

"I think so," says Marlon. "If we help each other."

"Okay, good."

"Did you get the location?"

"Yes. Milan, tomorrow at one o'clock. They'll meet you under the Arco Della Pace. Do you know where it is?"

"I do," says Marlon. "So their head office is in Milan, then?"

"No, but they'll meet you in Milan."

"Didn't you want me to check out their operations?"

"I do, and they will take you there."

"I don't understand?"

"Look, they will probably take you for a short ride before taking you to their offices. To show us they are serious about privacy."

"C'mon now," says Marlon. "They are going to take me for a ride?"

"Yes, and it's a win-win for us. They'll carry the cost to make sure everything stays off the radar."

"Alright," says Marlon. "I'll be there."

"One more thing," says LaFontaine. "Now when Sofia is an official team member, I want her to get in deep on this from the get-go. Maybe she should go with you?"

CROWD OF ONE

“Sure,” says Marlon. “I’ll ask her.”

“I already did, and she said yes.”

15

After Marlon and Sofia land in Milan, they immediately take a taxi to Arco Della Pace. They arrive at the monument ten minutes to noon. The air is cold and carries the smell of rain.

They walk up to the center of Piazza Sempione where a small group of tourists crowds in front of the gray and hollow park.

“Do you see anyone looking at us?” asks Marlon.

“No,” says Sofia.

Marlon feels a tiny raindrop on his nose. “Let’s go under the arch,” he says.

They get under the arch and huddle up against one of the walls.

“Ever done anything like this before?” he asks.

Sofia shakes her head.

“Me neither,” he says. “I guess it’s a requirement these days. Especially for their clients.”

“Makes you think, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” says Marlon. “People tend to think the internet is somehow parallel to our physical world. That we can apply the same principles, laws, and behaviors. We can’t. When you take out the physical factor in human interactions, another psychology plays out.”

“That’s an interesting thought,” says Sofia. “Considering that your company’s entire business model relies on the assumption that people’s online behavior reflects their authentic selves.”

Marlon gives her a nod. She’s smart, he thinks.

“Out of curiosity,” she says. “Why Atlas Analytica?”

“I could lie,” he says. “But nobody has a clue what their first job is like. You’re just happy to get a job.

“Fair enough.”

“What about you?” he asks. “Didn’t you think twice before signing your contract with us?”

“I did,” she says. “But we are all products of our time, aren’t we? As long as we stick to facts and support freedom of speech, I see no wrong in doing what we do. People need to think for themselves.”

Marlon smiles. “You’re good,” he says. “I agree.”

Sofia pulls out her phone. “It’s five minutes past noon.”

Marlon screens the faces around them. “Are we being stood up?”

“Either that or they are building suspense.”

Moments later, a young touristy-looking woman walks up to Sofia. “Please, take a photo,” says the young woman and puts a phone in Sofia’s hand.

The young woman walks back to her boyfriend and poses in front of the arch.

Sofia snaps a few photos of the young couple before they turn around and walk away.

“Your phone?” yells Sofia.

“Keep it,” the young woman yells back.

Marlon looks at Sofia. “There we go,” he says. “Very original.”

The phone in Sofia’s hand receives a message that reads, ‘Ljubljana 6 PM. Bring the phone.’

Marlon takes out his phone to call Rita.

“What, Slovenia?” asks Sofia.

“Looks like it,” says Marlon.

“Give me a minute,” says Rita to Marlon through the phone. “Stay on the line.”

Marlon hears Rita picking up another phone and starts typing on her keyboard. “Where are you right now?” she asks.

“Arco Della Pace,” says Marlon.

He hears Rita speaking Italian with someone on another line.

“I’ve booked you a rental close to the central train station,” says Rita. “An Über will pick you up at the split of Corso Sempione. I’ve sent you a screenshot.”

Marlon waves to Sofia and starts walking.

“Marlon,” says Rita through the phone, “Pat assured me that these guys are legit. But make sure to report back to me at regular intervals, okay?”

“Roger that,” says Marlon. “Did you speak to him today?”

“Yes, but there’s nothing new,” she says. “How’s Sofia doing?”

CROWD OF ONE

"She's good."

"Make sure she gets everything she needs. She probably didn't pack to be on the road these many days."

"I will," says Marlon and spots an Uber driving towards them up the street.

Thirty minutes later, they begin the five-hour drive towards Ljubljana.

"Let me know when you want to rest," says Sofia. "I don't mind driving."

"I'm alright," says Marlon and tests the engine of their rented Fiat 500X. "By the way, are you able to take off like this for a couple of days?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't have a cat or something like that?"

"I share a flat with my sister," says Sofia. "She will take care of the cat."

"Younger or older?"

"Younger."

"Did you grow up over there, in Lisbon?"

"We grew up in the North, close to Porto. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, sure," says Marlon. "I've been to your country, but only to Lisbon."

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah, I like your Fado."

"Really?" says Sofia and smiles. "Do you like the lyrics?"

"I wouldn't know," he says. "Need to learn Portuguese first."

"What about you, where did you grow up?"

"Faraway from Porto," he says. "I grew up in a place called Maine. Do you know where it is?"

"Northeast, close to Canada, no?"

"That's right," says Marlon.

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"No, I'm an only child."

"And your parents?"

"They still live there."

"Do you miss it?"

"Not really, no."

"Because you have a built a new life over here?"

"Most of my life revolves around work."

"So, you're a loner?"

"I wouldn't say that I'm lonely," says Marlon.

"But no cat?"

Marlon laughs. "No cat."

"I got it," says Sofia. "No siblings, no friends, no cat, and you like to listen to Fado, although you don't understand the lyrics." She leans back and looks at him. "Sorry to say this, but you are starting to freak me out."

"Do you want me to drop you off?"

She smiles. "As soon as possible, please."

"I forgot," he says. "I actually do have a friend outside of work. My neighbor, Mr. Dreyfus. An interesting man. He has no phone and no computer."

"So he's old?"

"Yes, but that's not the point," he says. "You see, I have my reasons to suspect that he is either a fugitive, a foreign spy, or a pimp of some sorts."

"Why?"

Marlon keeps a steady face. "Hear me out, and you be the judge."

"Alright," says Sofia and sits up straight. "Tell me more."

Five hours away from Milan. Past the medieval city of Verona and the coastal city of Venice. Across the Slovenian border and deep between high-rising Alps and the Adriatic Sea. The city of Ljubljana is soon within their sight.

Their pick-up phone receives another message. Sofia reads it out loud, "Continue straight to Zagreb."

Marlon sighs. "Alright," he says. "They're taking us farther east. Did they give us a new timeframe?"

"No," says Sofia. "Should I text them back?"

Marlon looks at her. He didn't even think of that. "Yes," he says. "Text them back."

Sofia starts typing. A few seconds later, they receive a response.

"Eight PM," Sofia reads out loud. "And they inserted a happy smiley."

"Let me see that," says Marlon.

Sofia shows him the display.

"These guys are kids," he says.

Marlon taps in Zagreb on the GPS. "One and a half hours away," he says, looking over at Sofia. "How are you feeling?"

"So far, so good," she says. "Guess it gets spookier when the sun goes down."

"Trust me, they are more spooked than us. Hence all the trouble."

Marlon picks up his phone to send their new destination to Rita.

"Do you want me to drive?" asks Sofia.

"I'm alright," says Marlon. "I'll let you know."

Half an hour later, Sofia turns quiet. Marlon glances at her relaxed hands resting on her thighs. She has fallen asleep.

Marlon receives a text message from Mia, asking if he is back from Madrid. He almost forgot. He and Mia were planning to meet this week. Right now, Marlon has no idea when he will be back in Paris. He will get back to Mia later tonight, he thinks, and put down his phone.

Unlike Italy and Slovenia, Croatia isn't part of the European Schengen area. So, when they reach the Croatian border, they need to stop and show their passports.

Marlon touches Sofia's shoulder. "We're at the border," he says quietly.

"Which border?" she asks.

"Croatia. We need to show our passports."

"Right," says Sofia and reaches into her bag.

The Croatian border control is a simple building with a few drive-through lanes. Marlon shows the border officer their identifications, and they are waved through.

"Why do you have a German passport?" asks Sofia, surprised.

Marlon tells her the story. The short version.

"Do you have any German heritage?" she asks.

"Not what I know about," says Marlon.

"Where's your family from?"

"Not sure. A mesh of Dutch, French, Irish, and Polish, I think. My parents never made a big deal out of it. So, I never looked into it."

"You are not curious?"

"Not really," he says. "What difference would it make if I knew?"

CROWD OF ONE

"I want to order one of those DNA tests," says Sofia. "It only costs a few euros. I have no idea what hides inside my Portuguese blood, but I'm curious to find out. You should do it too."

"I'm not sure about those tests," he says. "Who knows where your sample is being stored?"

"Don't be so cynical. It's just for fun."

"I'm just saying."

"I'll send it for you," she says and smiles. "I'll take a sample from you when you're asleep."

"Let's do like this," says Marlon. "If we get back from this trip alive, we'll both do it, alright?"

"Deal," says Sofia and reaches out her hand.

Twenty minutes away from Zagreb, near the Sava river along Bosnia and Herzegovina, they receive another message.

Sophia reads out loud, "Continue on E70 to Nikola Tesla International Airport. Be there before midnight."

"Where the hell is that?" asks Marlon.

Sofia types the name into the GPS. "Serbia," she says. "It's the main airport outside Belgrade. It's four hours away."

"I see what they are trying to do," says Marlon. "They try to get under our skin. Typical power move."

"Why do they want that?" asks Sofia.

"To look more important than they are," he says. "Legitimize a higher price. Position themselves. That kind of stuff."

"It kind of works, no?"

"Whatever," he says. "Let them do what they do. They probably have their reasons."

"I can drive the last part," says Sofia. "We could stop somewhere and change seats. We have the time."

"Alright," says Marlon and takes a deep breath. "Let's do that."

They turn off at a rest stop outside Zagreb that hosts a gas station, a motel, and a closed camping site.

The sun has set, and the weather is cold and misty. Although they are only three hours away from Italy, Marlon can tell the difference by breathing the air. It's something obvious about it, he thinks, but he can't put his finger on what it is.

After fueling up the car and seeking out the restroom, Marlon enters the small store. He picks up a couple of sandwiches stuffed with prosciutto and goat cheese, four bottles of water, and some bags of nuts and dried fruit.

When he leaves, he meets Sofia outside the entrance. "Did they have coffee?" she asks.

"Good idea," he says and hands her the food. "Take this to the car. I'll go back and get us some."

Inside the store, Marlon sends another message to Rita, updating her on their new destination.

When he returns outside, Sofia is leaning against the hood with her phone against her ear. Marlon can hear her speaking Portuguese in a low tone. He gives her one of the cups. She smiles and gestures that she is soon done.

"Take your time," says Marlon and sits down in the passenger's seat.

Sofia returns a few minutes later.

"All good?" he asks.

"That was my sister," she says.

"Is she worried?"

CROWD OF ONE

“Not at all,” says Sofia and adjusts the car seat.

“Remember, I’m the big sister. I’ll always be fine.”

“Of course.”

“Anything new on Jacob?” she asks, starting the car.

“No, nothing,” says Marlon. “I’ll call tomorrow if we don’t hear anything before then.”

“I must admit,” says Sofia, “I feel both angry and sad when thinking about it.”

“I understand,” says Marlon. “I mainly feel guilty.”

“You shouldn’t,” she says.

“I know, but I do.”

16

Marlon feels Sofia's hand touching his arm. He opens his eyes.

"We're at the border," she says.

"What's the time?"

"Ten thirty. We're one hour away from the airport."

Marlon sits up straight and gets out his passport.

Two car lanes are leading up to the Serbian border control. Only one car is waiting ahead of them. Marlon looks across the border and notes that there is plenty more traffic lined up on the other side.

"Nobody seems to pass from the other side?" he says.

"I know," says Sofia. "We barely met a car the last half hour."

They advance forward. A border officer asks for their passports and the purpose of their visit.

"Visiting friends," says Sofia.

CROWD OF ONE

The officer gives them a quick look, stamps their passports and waves them through.

On the other side, border officials dressed in different uniforms stand in groups, talking and smoking. Past them is a long line of lorries waiting to pass through to Croatia.

A few hundred yards behind the lorries, a large group of people walks on the road heading towards the border. The group is escorted by slow-moving police vehicles driving by their side.

"The Balkan route," says Sofia. "They must be migrants traveling through Turkey and Greece."

Marlon and Sofia observe the group in silence. Most are young men, seemingly from the Middle East and Asia.

"It's bizarre," says Sofia. "There walks one of our themes."

Marlon nods.

"Don't you feel weird about it?"

"It's a question of perspective," he says. "Being able to see the big picture. Like in any other job."

"You never think about it as propaganda?"

"Propaganda, in its true meaning, is to spread and propagate information. Factual information. There's nothing unethical about that." Marlon looks at Sofia. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"No," she says. "I'm just curious to know what you think."

"I used to be an idealist," says Marlon. "Before I figured out how the system works."

"Now, you're a realist?"

"Aren't you?"

"I am," she says. "But I'm not sure you are."

Marlon looks at Sofia, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"I think you're still an idealist," she says.

"Alright," he says and looks out of the window. "Everyone is free to their opinion."

"And a visionary," she says, giving him a quick look. "I mean that as a compliment."

They sit quietly for a moment, listening to the subtle sound of rubber tires driving against a smooth asphalted road.

Marlon clears his throat and looks at the GPS. "We're forty-five minutes away," he says. "Do you want to switch."

"I'm alright," says Sofia. "I can keep going."

The highway from the border leads all the way to the airport, which is situated on the outskirts of Belgrade. They drive through a flat landscape of open fields. A few industrial warehouses pop up every once in a while. Other than that, they don't see much through the dark night.

The closer they get to their destination, the more Marlon's nerves start fiddling around. He assumes that Sofia feels the same.

Ten minutes away from the airport, they receive a new message. Marlon reads it out loud: "Exit to airport, continue on 266, drive past the petrol station, park next to the black Mercedes van."

"That sounds about creepy enough," says Sofia.

"Don't worry," says Marlon. "If they suggest something inappropriate, we call it off."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Like boarding a plane to Moscow."

"We would need a visa for that."

"Good point," he says while observing a road sign written in the Cyrillic alphabet.

CROWD OF ONE

They see the lit-up airport emerging ahead. Sofia turns off the highway and onto road 266. They drive past a large field crowded with old military planes with a massive mushroom-looking building next to it. The whole scene has an ancient Soviet-era feel to it. The road continues between a parking house and a few dark stone buildings until it reaches an idle, poorly lit parking lot. Sofia slows down, and they start scouting for the black Mercedes van.

A violent roar and whoosh from a low-flying airplane above their heads.

"There it is," says Sofia and points at a shining black van standing under a vague streetlamp.

"Drive up behind it," says Marlon.

Sofia moves the car forward.

The van's front door slides open. A short bold man, dressed in all black, steps outside. He raises his arm and waves them over.

A heavy beat pulsates through Marlon's body.

"He doesn't look like the type of guy who uses smileys," says Marlon.

"What should we do?" asks Sofia.

"Turn up with my side against him. Keep the engine running."

Sofia stops their car five yards from the man.

Marlon rolls down his window and meets the man's eyes. Up close, the man reveals an old wiry face with hard features.

"Park here," the man says with a heavy Slavic accent. "I drive you to Miloš."

"Hold on a second," says Marlon and picks up the pick-up phone they received in Milan.

"What are you doing?" asks Sofia.

"I'm calling whoever has been sending us these messages."

After four long signals, someone picks up on the other side. "Yes?" answers a young manly voice.

"You probably know who I am," says Marlon. "I just arrived at the airport, and a man is telling me that he will drive us to Miloš. Are you Miloš?"

The voice on the other side chuckles. "I am," he says. "Didn't Pat tell you?"

"It's been a long drive," says Marlon. "What do we do now?"

"I told Pat it wasn't necessary for you to come here," says Miloš. "But he clearly wants to do his due diligence. Park your car and leave all your devices in it. Radenko will drive you to our office. You'll be back in an hour."

"We can drive there by ourselves," says Marlon.

"Sorry, standard security measures. It's best for everyone, trust me."

Marlon reflects for a moment.

"Marlon," says Miloš through the phone. "We are both well aware of the sensitive nature of my business. These days, everyone is watching everyone. It doesn't matter who you are or what you do. I can't risk the security of my employees. If you are not comfortable with this, call your boss, and we'll work something out."

Marlon looks at Sofia and then at Radenko. "Okay," he says.

"Okay," says Miloš. "See you soon."

They hang up.

"Sounds legit," says Marlon. "They will drive us to their office. We'll be back here in an hour."

"That's it?" asks Sofia.

CROWD OF ONE

“We can’t bring any devices,” says Marlon and turns off his phone before sneaking it into his pocket. “I’ll bring mine anyways. Just in case.”

Sofia nods.

“You can wait here if you want.”

“Are you kidding me,” she says. “Of course I’ll go with you.”

“Alright,” he says. “Let’s do this.”

Sofia parks their car next to the curb and they step outside.

“No worry,” says Radenko and points towards a small unmanned shed. “Security,” he says.

“You must be Radenko,” says Marlon and reaches out his hand. “I’m Marlon.”

Radenko shakes Marlon’s hand and slides open the door to the backseat. “Sit down. Relax,” says Radenko.

Marlon and Sofia climb inside. The van smells new and has four leather seats facing each other and fresh bottles of water lined up in-between.

Radenko jumps into the front seat and starts the car. “Fifteen minutes,” he says and turns on the radio.

They drive back up on the highway and towards the city of Belgrade.

Marlon and Sofia sit next to each other and look out through the tinted windows. They drive by high-rising apartment buildings, office complexes, and a couple of McDonald’s.

When entering the city, they drive off the highway and alongside the wide Sava, the same river they have followed since Slovenia. They drive past old town buildings that have their facades covered in graffiti. Then they turn up on

a wide boulevard with large impressive stone buildings and a few parks.

Few people crowd the street, and the gloomy January weather adds to the enigmatic feel.

A few blocks deep on the boulevard, they stop at a red light. In front of them, across the street, stands two massive buildings with carved out holes in it.

Marlon leans forward. "Do you see that?" he asks Sofia. "Those buildings are completely shattered. Looks like they are about to collapse."

"Must be from the war," says Sofia.

"What war?" he asks.

"The Kosovo war," says Sofia. "Back in ninety-nine,"

"Right," says Marlon and gazes at the war-torn buildings. He wonders why they haven't been demolished already.

The light turns green, and the van continues straight ahead. It turns into a small side street cramped between two large concrete structures. The structures are old and deserted. Like they have been abandoned in the middle of a failed renovation project, thinks Marlon.

Radenko slows down in front of a large metal gate. The gate opens automatically. Through the gate, they drive some hundred yards until they reach a small cul-de-sac. Radenko parks the van and slides open the back door.

"Miloš inside," says Radenko and points at a red metal door, leading into one of the concrete structures. "I take you."

Marlon looks at Sofia. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"We've already gone this far," she says, offering a nervous smile.

"At least we'll get a story out of it," he says.

CROWD OF ONE

They get out of the car and walks up to the red metal door. Radenko pulls out a large keyring and scrambles to find the right key. He slides the key into the lock and turns it two times. When he opens, a loud rusty sound echoes between the concrete walls surrounding them. Behind the door is a staircase that leads under the ground. Radenko walks in first and turns on a switch that fills the space with light.

“Downstairs,” says Radenko. “Close door.”

Marlon closes the door behind them.

“Okay,” says Radenko and starts walking down the stairs. Marlon walks first with Sofia closely behind.

One floor down, they reach a small compartment with three thick metal doors. Radenko takes out another key to open one of them.

“Okay,” says Radenko and holds the door open.

They walk through and enter a cold and empty room that resembles an old bomb shelter. At the other end of the room, behind a doorway without a door, is another hallway.

“Okay,” repeats Radenko and walks through the darkness and towards the doorway on the other side. Marlon and Sofia follow.

They stop in front of an open elevator shaft. Radenko pushes a button next to it, and the big steel ropes hanging inside the shaft begin to move upwards. The carriage that arrives also doesn’t have any doors.

“Under construction?” asks Marlon.

Radenko shrugs his shoulders and walks inside. “Downstairs,” he says.

Sofia places herself close to Marlon. He can feel her arm pressing against his side.

Radenko pushes another button, and the carriage descends deeper underground.

They pass by two empty and pitch-black floors and are greeted with an eerie breeze of cold air.

At the third floor down, the carriage stops with a light bounce. In front of them is another hallway with two closed metal doors.

“Miloš,” says Radenko and points at one of the doors. Then he tilts his head, ordering them to get off.

Sofia and Marlon exit the carriage. Radenko stays inside.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” asks Marlon.

Radenko shakes his head and makes the carriage travel upwards again.

Marlon takes a deep breath and walks up to the door. He grabs the handle and looks over at Sofia’s wide-open eyes. With his heart beating fast, he slowly opens the door. Behind it, he hears a distant echo of subtle voices and fingers typing on keyboards. Marlon peeks inside and sees a spacious room lit up by a few lamps in the middle of the floor. Under the lamps, ten youngsters crowd a few desks equipped with computer screens. Marlon push opens the door and steps inside. The people inside turn their heads towards him. They give him a brief second of their attention before returning to their screens again. Apparently, Marlon’s face doesn’t seem to arouse much interest.

Both Marlon and Sofia stand still for a second, trying to grasp what they are looking at. Except for the crowded desks in the middle, the large room stands empty with deep dark corners and cold cement floors.

Seconds pass, but nobody seems to care about their presence.

CROWD OF ONE

Someone must be expecting them, thinks Marlon. Where is this guy Miloš?

Marlon nods to Sofia, and they begin walking towards the desks in the middle. As they get closer, Marlon peeks at their computer screens. A few are busy coding, whereas others seem to be editing photos of humans.

“You must be Marlon?” says a skinny guy dressed in a green tracksuit.

“Are you Miloš?” asks Marlon.

The skinny guy stands up. “That’s me.”

Miloš walks up to Marlon and Sofia. He has short brown hair, a distinct jawline and looks to be in his twenties.

“You guys seem busy,” says Marlon.

“The night shift,” says Miloš. “They are in their zone.”

Marlon reaches out his hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you,” he says. “This is Sofia, my colleague.”

Miloš shakes their hands. “Come with me,” he says and walks towards a door on the other side of the room. Marlon observes the people. Two women and seven men. All in their twenties or early thirties. He hears two of them speaking to each other in accented English. Another one picks up his phone and answers in German.

Miloš leads them to another room, furnished with a large conference table and two wide sofas in front of an enormous projector screen. A large fridge stands next to a kitchen counter that is jammed with empty glass bottles and old food cartons.

Marlon notes an overwhelming smell of popcorn hanging in the air.

“Can I get you anything,” asks Miloš. “Beer, wine, coke, water?”

“Water,” says Sofia.

“Sure,” says Marlon.

Miloš opens the fridge and pulls out three bottles of water. “Let’s sit down over here,” he says and walks over to the large conference table. “Sorry about the smell. I brought in a popcorn machine yesterday but it overcooked.”

“I figured I recognized the smell,” says Marlon.

“I don’t know how to get rid of it,” says Miloš. “We don’t have any windows down here.”

“Indoor plants,” says Marlon. “They work like air filters.”

“That’s a good idea,” says Miloš. “Someone suggested a bowl of vinegar. But that smells even worse, so I didn’t see the point.”

“I agree,” says Marlon. “I had a cleaner who used it in my bathroom once. It stinks.”

“Where do you live?” asks Miloš.

“Paris.”

“Too bad what has happened there.”

“You mean the attacks?”

“Yeah, and all that stuff.”

“It is what it is,” says Marlon.

Miloš turns to Sofia. “What about you?”

“I live in Lisbon.”

“Nice,” says Miloš. “Not too many Muslims yet.”

“Interesting choice of office,” says Marlon. “What’s the story?”

“It’s pretty cool, right?” says Miloš and lights up in a smile. “It’s connected to the old Ministry of Defense.”

“That’s the bomb-shattered buildings?” asks Marlon.

“The work of NATO,” says Miloš.

“I assume that you are Serbian?” asks Sofia.

“And Swedish,” says Miloš. “I’ve got dual passports. But that doesn’t mean much these days.”

“I’m sure many people would disagree with you,” says Sofia.

Miloš smiles and leans back in his chair, stretching his neck from side to side. “National identity is a thing of the past,” he says. “Especially in Europe, where it has become a joke. Your passport doesn’t say anything about your values or culture anymore.”

“I didn’t know a passport represented your culture?” says Sofia.

“No?” says Miloš. “Well, it used to.”

“Times of change,” says Marlon.

“You’ll see,” says Miloš and looks at Marlon. “Soon, the people of Europe will divide themselves by culture and ethnicity. Just wait and see.”

“Why ethnicity?” asks Sofia.

“In times of pressure,” says Miloš, “you are forced to act on presumptions. Or statistical probability, if you like. It’s basic risk management.” Miloš drinks his water and turns his attention to Marlon. “When the United States invaded Iraq,” he says, “Saddam Hussein said that ‘you are going to fail in Iraq because you don’t know the language, the history, and you don’t understand the Arab mind.’ That’s a quote.”

Marlon gets what Miloš is trying to say. But it fills no purpose to their meeting, and there’s no point fueling the discussion. “Luckily, Angela Merkel understands the Arab mind,” says Marlon jokingly.

Miloš laughs. “That’s a good one.”

“Anyway,” says Marlon. “It looks like you are developing some revolutionary products around here.”

Marlon recovers from the laugh.

"I'm happy to hear that," Miloš says. "And knowing what I know, I think we will make great partners."

"Me too," says Marlon and leans in towards Miloš. "We are looking for quality bots," he says. "Bots that are subtle but effective and can help boost a campaign in its early stage. Not too obvious, though. It needs to appear organic."

"I got you," says Miloš. "That's exactly what we are doing here. Let me give you a quick demo."

"That would be great," says Marlon.

Miloš stands up. "Wait here," he says and walks out of the room.

Sofia sighs. "I'm sorry," she says. "I went off topic. It was my nerves."

"Don't be sorry," says Marlon. "Everything is fine."

Miloš returns with his laptop and plugs it into the projector. Then he gives them a rehearsed high-level presentation of their products. He showcases how they produce their bots and how they perform online. He explains that a human operator acts as a puppet master for a cluster of unique bots and how they regularly update their coded behavior to appear more human online.

"We run different types of programs," says Miloš. "Some clusters are closely monitored by an operator. Others are automated by standard algorithms. It all depends on what you want to achieve."

When Miloš is done, Marlon is impressed. Miloš seems to have a good understanding of what they are looking for, he thinks. That's not an easy task considering how protected their operations are.

"Who owns the company?" asks Marlon.

"I'm the co-founder," says Miloš. "My partner runs the day shift."

"What's your corporate name?"

"We don't really have a name," says Miloš. "We are not really a corporation either. We are more of a network. Like a partnership, I would say."

"Why Belgrade?" asks Marlon.

"Different reasons," says Miloš. "Connections, budget, culture. Those kinds of things."

"And," says Marlon, "why the complicated process to get us here?"

Miloš laughs. "You know how it is," he says. "They always want to map out operations like ours."

"They?" asks Sofia.

"Yeah, the self-proclaimed rulers of the internet," says Miloš. "We don't want to be on anyone's radar. That's it, basically."

"We get it," says Marlon.

"I know," says Miloš and turns to Sofia. "Although I got a bit nervous when I heard you were coming."

"Why is that?" asks Sofia.

"Because you're a journalist," says Miloš.

"She is with us," says Marlon. "She's a contracted writer."

"I know," says Miloš. "Pat explained everything. It's cool."

Marlon looks at Sofia, who looks a bit agitated.

"Since you brought it up," says Miloš, turning to Marlon, "I promised not to say anything, but now I feel kind of bad about it."

"What?" asks Marlon.

“It was Pat’s idea to take you here by car,” says Miloš. “I suggested you take the plane.”

“Really?”

“He didn’t tell me why,” says Miloš. “I guess he doesn’t want any records of his employees shuttling forth and back to Belgrade these days.”

Marlon thinks about it for a moment. “I know why,” he says and smiles. “Don’t worry about it. It has nothing to do with you.”

“Don’t tell him I told you,” says Miloš. “He seems like a good guy, and I don’t want to step on his toes.”

“I won’t,” says Marlon before yawning and checking the time. It’s half past midnight. He turns to Sofia. “We should start looking for a hotel.”

“Already arranged,” says Miloš. “We booked you a suite at the Hyatt. It’s only fifteen minutes from the airport.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“But back then we didn’t know you were going to be two,” says Miloš. “Book another room and add it to the same bill. We’ll take care of it.”

“We appreciate that,” says Marlon and stands up. “Thanks.”

“Radenko will take you back to your car.”

Miloš walks them back to the elevator where Radenko is waiting.

“I almost forgot,” says Marlon and hands Miloš the USB stick. “I hope we can set up a different data feed, though. I’m not doing this every week.”

“For sure,” says Miloš and smiles. “We’ve got plenty of secure options to suggest.”

CROWD OF ONE

They all shake hands before Marlon and Sofia follow Radenko up the elevator shaft and back inside the black Mercedes van.

"Why would he do that?" asks Sofia. "Why would he have us travel by car and not by plane?"

"I'm not sure," says Marlon. "But I have an idea."

"What idea?"

"He wanted us to bond through the experience," says Marlon. "He always says that relationships are built through stories."

Sofia looks back at him, surprised.

"I've seen him pull this trick before," says Marlon.

"Did it work?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know," says Sofia.

"I think it did," says Marlon. "A little bit, at least."

They sit silently for a moment.

Marlon sees Sofia smiling.

"What?" he asks and starts smiling too.

"I'm drained," says Sofia. "I need to sleep."

After Radenko has returned them to their car at the airport, they drive straight to the hotel.

At the welcome desk, they are told that no additional rooms are available. The city is hosting its annual Russian trade show, and all the rooms are sold out.

They look at each other with tired eyes.

"Who cares," says Sofia. "It's already in the middle of the night. Let's split the bed."

17

Marlon wakes up hearing water pattering against the bathroom tile. The curtains are wide open, and it's dark outside. He rolls over and looks at the other side of the bed. It's empty but still warm. He breathes in her scent.

Marlon recalls falling asleep the second he touched the sheets last night. Sofia was still in the bathroom brushing her teeth. Both had been too tired to care about the possible tension of sleeping in the same bed.

He hears Sofia turning off the shower and her bare feet tip-toeing onto the dry floor. Moments later, she walks out with a towel wrapped around her body. Her hair is made up in a bun, revealing her naked shoulders and bare neck.

Marlon looks away.

"Good morning," she says. "Sorry, I need to grab something from my bag."

"Did you sleep well?"

CROWD OF ONE

“Like a rock,” she says and tip-toes back into the bathroom. “Don’t worry. I’m done in a few minutes.”

“Take your time,” says Marlon and rests his head against the pillow. Yesterday went well, he thinks. Miloš has a good operation going, and his neurotic security concern is a good sign. Now, they just have to drive back to Milan, get back to Paris, and launch the pilot campaign.

Two hours away from Belgrade, somewhere in the middle of Croatia, Marlon receives a call from LaFontaine.

“Good job,” says LaFontaine through the phone. “No questions about the contract?”

“Nothing.”

“Great.”

“And Jacob?”

Marlon hears LaFontaine taking a deep breath. “Someone accessed his email,” he says. “From a café in Dakar.”

“Was it him?”

“Whoever it was, the person only logged on, read his emails, and signed out. That’s it. The private investigator is trying to get in on the ground to find out more.”

“Is there anything we can do?”

LaFontaine takes a long pause. “I need you to go to Sweden,” he says. “To meet with a lawyer specialized in European data protection law. He represents all the big players up in Brussels.”

“What type of players?”

“Our type.”

“Alright,” says Marlon. “What do I meet him about?”

“Because we’ll run the Greek campaign through a separate corporation, I need you to sign a few legal documents.”

“Do I have the mandate to do that?”

“Now you do.”

“When do I meet him?”

“Tomorrow at one o’clock. I’m not able to make it from Abidjan. Rita will put you on the first plane from Milan by tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” says Marlon. “I’m on it.”

“Good,” says LaFontaine. “How are things otherwise?”

“Everything is under control.”

“Good. Very good.” LaFontaine pauses. “On your way back to Milan?” he asks.

“We’ll arrive to dinner.”

“I’ve heard that Mario is doing a hell of a job over there.”

“I’m not surprised,” says Marlon.

“If we get the entire group budget, we would double in size.”

“That’s a game changer.”

“Yes, it could change everything,” says LaFontaine. “It would also force us to raise more capital.”

“Would that be a problem?”

“The market isn’t ready yet. People don’t understand our model and way of doing things. Claiming a fair value would be a tricky process at this stage.”

“What about a loan?”

“I would never open our books to a bank, let alone some schmuck chasing another corporate bond deal.”

“I see what you mean,” says Marlon.

“Unless,” says LaFontaine, “we would find a single buyer. Preferably a nonfinancial company. Someone who is already active in the media space and has a management team that trusts our model and our people.”

Marlon understands that LaFontaine is talking about Tricolore Media. “What would stop us from dropping a hint?” he asks.

“If we approach them, we’ve already lost the game. They have to approach us. You understand?”

“Of course.”

“Atlas Analytica could be a strategic asset for Tricolore Media.”

“If the numbers line up,” says Marlon.

“Which they do,” says LaFontaine. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Absolutely.”

LaFontaine pauses. “So what do you think? Can he do it?”

“He can, yes.”

“Ask him to do it subtly and diligently. We’ll produce whatever figures and angles he needs.”

“Got it,” says Marlon.

“Good.”

They stay quiet for a moment.

“How’s Sofia holding up?” asks LaFontaine.

“She’s fine,” says Marlon. “Everything is going great.”

“She should go with you to Sweden,” says LaFontaine. “We can’t rely on Jacob anymore, and we should use the momentum you’ve created. Start working on the long list of writers and consultants for the scale-up phase. Like that, we are one step ahead.”

“Alright,” says Marlon. “I’ll ask her.”

They finish the call and hang up.

Marlon turns to Sofia. "Have you ever been to Stockholm?" he asks.

"No, why?"

"I need to go there and meet with a lawyer tomorrow. Mr. LaFontaine suggested that you tag along. We need to put together a list of writers and consultants for the scale-up phase."

"Tomorrow?"

"You don't have to. It's up to you."

"I'll go," says Sofia. "I want to be prepared for next week when I meet the whole team."

"Okay," says Marlon. "I'll call Rita and set it up."

"What about Jacob?" she asks. "Anything new?"

"Someone used his email account at a café in Dakar."

Sofia looks at him with big eyes. "That's good news, right?"

"We don't know if it's him yet."

"No surveillance cameras?"

"The private investigator is on it."

"By the way, how can they monitor his email?"

Marlon shrugs his shoulder. "The police, I guess," he says and picks up the phone to call Rita.

Rita sets them up at a hotel in Milan and books two plane tickets to Stockholm, departing at eight o'clock the next morning.

Hours later, around seven o'clock in the evening, they arrive outside Milan. The traffic into the city is dense, and they get caught up in a bumper-to-bumper traffic jam.

Marlon is on the phone with Mario.

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"I spoke to the boss," says Marlon. "He said that you are doing a hell of a job with the new account."

"So far, yes," says Mario. "They have so many internal projects, I have the feeling they could absorb our entire company."

"Sounds like a gold mine."

"What about you? Still on that secret mission?"

"In fact, I'm in Milan. Until tomorrow morning."

"You're in Milano? Right now?"

"Almost," says Marlon. "I'm in a rental car, slowly penetrating myself into the city."

"Why didn't you tell me? I will send you my address. You can join me and Gia for dinner tonight."

Marlon has never met Gia in person.

"I would love that," says Marlon and looks over at Sofia who has dozed off in the passenger seat. "Can I bring someone along?"

"Who?"

"New colleague. You'll like her."

Marlon and Sofia arrive at Mario's apartment at around nine o'clock.

Mario opens the door and greets Marlon with a happy smile and a welcoming hug.

Marlon has explained Sofia's role as a contractor, and Mario is well aware of their restrictions to talk about their project.

"Remember," says Mario jokingly, "tonight, all attempts to discuss business is officially illegal, alright?"

They all laugh.

Gia is a striking brunette with an energetic smile and bright, intelligent eyes. She introduces herself in perfect but accented English—just like Mario.

They enter into a small two-room apartment with a tiny balcony offering a glimpse of the Naviglio Grande—a canal that stretches forty miles across the region of Lombardia.

During the dinner, their discussion is mostly lighthearted and relaxed. It hits a serious point when Marlon tells them about Jacob and what happened in Abidjan.

“I didn’t know he had a brother,” says Mario.

“Half-brother,” says Marlon. “They didn’t know each other growing up.”

After the dinner, Marlon and Mario walk out on the balcony together.

“You’ve had a lot of face time with the boss lately,” says Mario. “Must be an important project?”

“I’ll get to that,” says Marlon. “Tell me about the deal with Tricolore Media. How’s it going?”

“It’s going well,” says Mario. “Except that David is becoming a pain in the ass.”

Marlon laughs. “Yeah, why?”

“The guy hasn’t been involved until I signed the account but now he’s trying to take over the entire deal.”

“Will you let him?”

“Not this time. I’m getting really close with their CEO, Frank Borolo. He is an important man around here. If I do well, this might lead to something bigger.”

“That’s good,” says Marlon.

“Could be my first break,” says Mario and hangs over the balcony. “I could move here full time. Get a bigger place. Gia would like that.”

"I'm going to tell you two things," says Marlon. "But it needs to stay between you and me."

"Of course," says Mario. "That goes without saying."

Marlon leans in next to Mario. "First, LaFontaine is expanding into Australia. He has offered me ten percent of the shares in the local business. I will go there in the coming months to lay the groundwork."

"That's big," says Mario and lights up in a smile. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," says Marlon. "That's all the info I have so far, but I wanted you to know."

Mario nods. "I appreciate that."

"Second thing," says Marlon. "He is looking for an exit in Europe."

"He is selling the company?"

"The European operations, yes."

Marlon stands up straight. "He needs capital to grow internal resources, but he's afraid to open the books. He needs a strategic buyer."

Mario smiles. "I could see this coming," he says. "The deal with Tricolore Media could push us to the next threshold."

"And you see the solution, right?"

Mario looks at Marlon and nods. "This makes sense to them."

"He wants them to make the first move," says Marlon. "He needs help to plant the idea."

"Like I told you, I have an in with the CEO. I know who his confidants are. If they get the right figures, they would see the opportunity."

"Whatever you need," says Marlon. "That's his word."

"And us?"

“If this goes through, I’m pretty sure your seat at the table is secured.”

Mario starts smiling and looks out over the balcony. “Not too long ago, we could barely tie our ties,” he says. “Remember that?”

Marlon laughs.

Mario turns around and looks at Gia and Sofia through the window.

“She is great,” says Marlon. “Beautiful, smart, all you could ask for.”

Mario looks at Marlon. “You only met her a few days ago?”

“Very funny,” says Marlon. “I was speaking about Gia.”

Mario laughs. “You’re right,” he says. “She is more than that.”

An hour later, close to midnight, Marlon and Sofia arrive at their hotel in the eastern parts of central Milan.

Marlon feels good about himself. Everything is going as planned and they’re moving forward. He turns to Sofia. “Do you want to have a drink?” he asks. “Before we go to bed?”

Sofia tilts her head. “Sure, why not?”

They enter into the hotel’s dimly lit restaurant where a modest bar is set up against the back wall.

A few guests are finishing a late meal, and a playlist of Dean Martin’s greatest hits is looping in the background.

Marlon orders a cognac and Sofia a glass of red wine.

“How is it like to grow up in Porto?” asks Marlon.

“You would love it,” says Sofia.

“Yeah?”

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"I grew up in a village outside the city. My parents still live there. Both are retired but they continue to run a small café together."

"Your family owns a café?" asks Marlon, surprised.

"It's small and simple, but I love it," says Sofia.

"Tell me about your parents."

Sofia smiles and looks away for a second.

Marlon admires her expression. He can tell that they mean a lot to her.

"What do you want to know?" she asks.

"I don't know," says Marlon. "Tell me about your childhood. How you grew up."

She gives him a curious look and takes a sip of from her wine. "Alright," she says and smiles. "Let's see."

Sofia begins telling him about her childhood dream of becoming a dancer. Her studies in Lisbon. Her first job. The relationship to her younger sister.

Marlon enjoys listening to her. At first, she is short on details, but with time she begins to remember more anecdotes. She smiles a lot.

Towards the end of their drink, Sofia excuses herself to go to the restroom. When she jumps down from her stool, she loses her balance and instinctively puts her hand on Marlon's thigh.

An electric beat pumps through his body.

Sofia quickly takes her hand away. "Sorry," she says.

Marlon sits up straight and clears his throat. "What's the time?" he asks and pulls out his phone.

Sofia takes a step back. "I don't know."

"We need to leave in five hours."

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A hand strokes Marlon's shoulder. He can tell by the soft touch that it is a woman's hand.

"Sir, please fasten your seatbelt."

"What...?"

"Sir, we are descending. Please fasten your seatbelt and put your seat in an upright position."

Marlon looks out the window and sees a snow-covered landscape approaching from below. The land is flat with thick woods and sporadic fields.

It's eleven thirty in the morning, but the sun hangs low in the sky.

Marlon has been in Stockholm a few times before. The climate reminds him of home. He likes Sweden, but there is something about it that he can't seem to figure out. Although the surface is calm and peaceful, there are clues of a dark and calculating underbelly. Perhaps it's because

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the country is cut off from the rest of the continent, he thinks.

After landing, outside in the taxi line, a swift chilly wind greets their bare cheeks, and the rough cold instantly starts to eat through their thin overcoats.

"Probably twenty degrees," says Marlon.

Sofia turns to him with a confused look.

"Fahrenheit," he says. "In Celsius, that's about minus ten."

"That's cold," she says. "But it's not too bad. It's fresh."

"The air is dry up here," says Marlon. "Makes the cold more pleasant."

"Wish I had better shoes, though," says Sofia and looks down at her low shoes, shoes for a mild winter in the European south.

"Let's be quick," says Marlon and moves towards an empty taxi.

Mr. Westberg's office is located along Vasagatan in central Stockholm. It's about a forty-minute drive from the airport.

Twenty minutes towards the city, the traffic begins to slow down. Marlon looks ahead and sees a long queue of cars stacking up in front of them. "What's going on?" he asks the driver.

"Let me check," says the driver and starts tapping on his phone. "Looks like an accident," he says. "A truck or something."

"Will it take long?" asks Marlon.

"You never know," says the driver. "It looks like it just happened. Are you in a hurry?"

"Yes, we have a one o'clock meeting."

“I could drop you off at a train station not too far away from here. It’s one stop from the central train station downtown. Only five minutes away from your destination. It would be your fastest option.”

“You could do that?” asks Marlon.

“Of course,” says the driver and moves over to the right lane towards the next exit.

Soon after, they stop at a small railway station in a suburban area surrounded by high-rising apartment buildings and window-clad offices.

“Ask for a ticket to the city center,” says the driver. “Then you follow the map on your phone. Ten minutes on the train and then a five-minute walk—you will be there in twenty minutes.”

“Thanks a lot,” says Marlon and pays the driver with his credit card.

Ten minutes later, they step on a clean and modern suburban train heading towards the city center. They sit down opposite a middle-aged man and woman—both seemingly Scandinavian and dressed in thick winter jackets and warm boots.

Marlon figures that he and Sofia must look like two tourists who have no clue how to dress for a proper winter. The Maine boy in him feels slightly ashamed.

As the train is set to depart, a large group of youngsters run along the platform and squeeze themselves through the doors at the last second. The youngsters make Marlon think of the guys he saw shooting rockets before the terror attack at Trocadéro. The main difference is their more expensive-looking clothes.

Inside the train, the youngsters’ behavior is loud and nervous. They speak loudly and play music through the

speakers on their phones. The man sitting in front of Marlon sighs in irritation. Most passengers look the other way, minding their own business.

One of the youngsters, a tall guy wearing a Chicago Bulls cap, raises his phone in the air. A sound resembling an Arabic prayer begins to play. The others quiet down and the melody echoes throughout the silent train. When the prayer stops, the tall youngster yells in broken English, "A silent moment for our brothers who died in the Paris attack." The youngsters bow their heads in silence. A few seconds later, the tall guy yells, "Now, a quiet moment for all the infidels who died." The youngsters respond in a loud roar. They jump and cheer, slapping their hands against the walls, doing all they can to create a loud noise.

Marlon thinks about Paul, feeling frustrated and humiliated. He looks around him. Nobody seems to care. Everyone acts like the youngsters don't exist. As if they couldn't be heard.

Marlon feels his heart pumping faster and harder.

"Relax," says the man sitting in front of Marlon, using flawless English. "It's not worth it. They are trying to provoke you."

Marlon looks at the man, wondering how he knew. Then he realizes his clenched fists. The man had read Marlon's body language.

"I had a colleague who died in that attack," says Marlon.

"I'm sorry to hear that," says the man. "Welcome to Sweden. An importer and supporter of Islamists. Although, officially, we call them refugees."

The woman sitting next to the man gives him a concerned look. "Show some sympathy," she says. "They are fleeing war. In my book, that's called a refugee."

“Give me a break,” says the man. “They are migrants who exploit the system. Open your eyes.”

“Racist,” says the woman and turns away.

“I’m not a racist,” says the man loud and clear, still speaking in flawless English. “I’m just against cockroaches pestering my country with their disgusting and ignorant religion and way of life.”

An older man, a few seats away, overhears the discussion and yells something in Swedish to the man opposite Marlon. The man responds in a loud tone.

The youngsters don’t seem to acknowledge, or care, about the exchange happening in front of Marlon. They continue chattering between themselves and playing loud music on their phones.

The two men continue throwing harsh-sounding Swedish words between each other. Soon, the women next to them get involved again.

Marlon can’t understand what is being said but senses a dispute is about to break loose.

The train starts to slow down. And as if the shouting was synchronized with the train’s speed, all the parties calm down. The dispute never catches fire. The doors open and all parties leave the train, calmly going about in their own way.

Marlon and Sofia exchange a puzzled look before they do the same.

The street towards Westberg’s office is crowded with fast-walking people wearing warm coats and breathing out steam. The street’s old and robust stone buildings, constructed to last through the cold climate, add to the harsh and wintery atmosphere.

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After a fast five-minute walk, they stop outside a modest entrance of a five-story, 18th-century building. Marlon places his cold fingertips on the ancient intercom phone to dial Westberg's office. After a few crackling signals, a distant Swedish voice responds.

"Marlon Renner here to see Erik Westberg," says Marlon, noting the security camera situated above the door.

"Step inside," says the voice, followed by buzz opening the door's lock.

Behind the door is an empty hallway with large mirrors on both walls. A red carpet covers the floor, leading up to an elevator.

They walk across the red carpet and enter the elevator. There are no buttons inside.

The doors close automatically and they start moving upwards.

"Another weird elevator," says Marlon.

"At least this one has doors," says Sofia.

The elevator stops. The doors open and they face a hallway decorated with the same red carpet as downstairs. There are two doors, one on each wall.

"I guess this is our stop," says Marlon, stepping outside.

A pale young man dressed in a dark suit enters the hallway. "Welcome," he says in a formal voice and holds open one of the doors. "This way please."

They enter into a sterile and bright room with crisp white walls and high ceiling. An empty desk stands in front of the window, and a red designer couch stands in one corner.

"Have a seat," says the young man. "Erik will see you soon."

They sit down on the couch and the young man installs himself behind the desk.

Opposite the couch hangs the room's only painting. It's a large painting that depicts an hourglass filled with dark red fluid dripping from a full upper bulb into an empty lower bulb. Its colors are so intense that it makes the rest of the room disappear.

"Do you see that?" whispers Sofia. "It looks like it's plugged with something."

"What do you mean?"

"The hourglass," she says. "Something is stopping the liquid from flowing through."

Marlon leans forward. "Yes, under the color," he whispers. "What is that?"

Another door in the room opens, and a man enters with a heavy step. The man has messy gray hair, a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and a burgundy-red tie loosely tied around his neck.

"Mr. Renner," says the man and walks up to Marlon. "I'm Erik."

They shake hands, and Marlon introduces himself and Sofia.

"This shouldn't take long," says Erik and looks at Sofia, hinting that only Marlon is invited into his office. "Shall we?"

"Sure," says Marlon and walks ahead of Erik while Sofia sits down on the couch again.

Erik's office follows the same design as the previous room. Crisp white walls and sparsely furnished with a large desk and three chairs. Several boxes and piles of papers are stacked along the walls. The scene reminds Marlon of his

first meeting with LaFontaine, in his office three and a half years ago.

“Take a seat,” says Erik and points at a chair in front of his desk. “Too bad Pat couldn’t make it. I heard about his brother.”

“Yes, it’s a mystery,” says Marlon and sits down. “We all hope for the best.”

Erik clears some space on his desk by moving a pile of papers towards the edge. It looks like he has been up the whole night, thinks Marlon.

“I’m sorry about the mess,” says Erik. “My wife is redecorating my office.”

“We were looking at your painting out there,” says Marlon. “It’s quite intense. Who’s the artist?”

“Don’t ask me,” says Erik with a heavy sigh. “To be honest, I haven’t had time to look at it myself.” He picks up a handful of documents and places them in front of Marlon.

“What’s this?” asks Marlon and pulls his chair closer to the desk.

“As the CEO and chairman of the new corporation, you need to sign a few official documents.”

“Shouldn’t Mr. LaFontaine be the chairman?” asks Marlon.

“No, that won’t work. He can’t sign a license agreement between two of his own corporations. It wouldn’t look legitimate. That’s why we decided to end your current contract with Atlas Analytica and make you the chairman of this new corporation that will handle this Greek project you’re working on. It makes much more sense, especially since you will be moving to Australia soon.”

“Okay,” says Marlon. “But Mr. LaFontaine didn’t explain this to me.”

“I know,” says Erik. “He wanted me to do it. That’s why he sent you here.”

“I should call him.”

Erik looks at his watch, slightly annoyed. “If you must,” he says.

Marlon picks up his phone and calls LaFontaine.

“How is it going?” answers LaFontaine in a happy tone. Marlon can hear kids in the background battling for their father’s attention. He must have returned home from Abidjan, he thinks.

“All good,” says Marlon before he explains the situation presented to him by Erik.

“This is better for you,” says LaFontaine. “The new corporation will only function as a middleman, facilitating the license deal between Atlas Analytica and the other corporation which will receive the payments from Mark Huber’s team. Once the project is finalized, the corporation will be liquidated, and you will get a piece of the proceeds. Do you follow?”

“Yes,” says Marlon.

“Don’t worry about it. Erik will have you sign a paper explicitly outlining that you enter the role as chairman under his legal counsel. That will make him liable for any potential legal actions against the corporation or you as its chairman. We are all in the same boat.”

“Alright,” says Marlon. “I get it.”

“Trust me, Erik is the best in the business. Everything has been taken care of.”

“I trust you,” says Marlon. “I only wanted to clarify with you before I sign anything.”

“That’s good,” says LaFontaine. “By the way, I want you and Sofia to meet me at my house tomorrow morning, nine o’clock. I’m flying to Berlin in the afternoon and won’t be able to get into the office. I’ve already narrowed down the list of writers and consultants that I want us to use. So you don’t have to look into that. It’s already done.”

“Okay,” says Marlon. “We’ll be there.”

They finish the call and hang up.

“Are we good?” asks Erik.

“Yes,” says Marlon. “Give me a rundown of the new corporation.”

“The new corporation is based in The Netherlands, named Aristotle Research. It’s owned by three different offshore trustee corporations. You will use the Dutch corporation to sign a license agreement with Atlas Analytica in France. You will also use it to purchase shares in a Seychelles corporation that has a license agreement with a corporation in Panama. The Panama corporation is linked to receiving income from the Greek project. Once the money starts flowing into the Dutch corporation, you will pay annual fees to Atlas Analytica in France. Just like any other client.”

“Who’s the ultimate owner?”

“Pat is,” says Erik. “Indirectly, of course.”

“How long do we plan to keep this structure?”

“Probably a year or so. It makes sense to keep you as the chairman for a while, and it’s better for your personal situation. There is money in the accounts, you will receive a regular salary, and I will facilitate all your legal activities.”

“Do I have anything to worry about?”

“Nothing,” says Erik. “You will be wrapped up in cotton.”

Marlon reads through the documents, and everything seems to check out. He discusses a few points with Erik to make sure he fully understands the content of each document. Then he signs.

When Marlon and Sofia exit Erik Westberg's office, it's three o'clock in the afternoon, and the sun has begun to set. Hungry and tired, they seek out a nearby restaurant on the same street.

"How did it go?" asks Sofia.

"Just formalities," says Marlon. "I had to sign a bunch of papers."

"All linked to the Greek project?"

"Mostly."

They enter the restaurant and order two plates of meat, mashed potatoes, and steamed vegetables.

Twenty minutes later, they lean back in their seats, ready to fall asleep.

"We've got five hours until our flight back," says Marlon.

"What's the plan?"

Marlon looks out the window. "There's a movie theatre five minutes from here. What do you say?"

"What about that list we were supposed to complete?" asks Sofia.

"I forgot to tell you," says Marlon, "Mr. LaFontaine already did it. We are meeting at his house outside Paris tomorrow morning."

"Me too?" she asks.

"You're a key player now," he says. "Rita will set you up at a hotel in Paris and make sure you get reimbursed for new clothes and whatnot. It's not a problem. You'll have time to fly back home over the weekend."

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"That's alright," says Sofia. "I was warned this could get intense."

"So," he says, "should we kill some time at the cinema?"

Sofia smiles. "Sure."

They pay for their meal and head outside, where large snowflakes swirl through the cold air. The movie theatre is only five minutes away, but their bodies quickly freeze up during the short walk.

At the ticket machine, they heat up their hands and begin browsing available movies.

"You choose," says Marlon.

"What about this one," says Sofia and points at the latest Marvel movie.

"Okay, anyone but that one," he says.

"C'mon, you said I got to choose?"

"I forgot to mention that any Marvel movie is off the table."

"What about this one, then?"

"Haven't you seen it already?"

"No."

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

"Alright," says Marlon, "I guess I could see it again."

"Tell me which movies you haven't seen already?"

"That one."

"You want to see it?"

"Only if you want to," says Marlon. "It's your pick."

Sofia shakes head. "Incrível," she says. "You already knew."

Less than ten minutes into the movie, Marlon falls asleep. After a while, he wakes up with a pressing need to pee. Opening his eyes, he discovers that Sofia is not sitting

next to him. Her jacket and bag are still there, but she is gone. She must have beat him to the toilets, he thinks, and waits for her to return.

After three minutes, Marlon can't hold it any longer. He leaves their stuff and rushes to the bathroom. In the hallway, he sees Sofia from the back, talking into her phone.

"I'm in Sweden," he overhears her say in English. "I'll be in Paris by evening."

Marlon taps on her shoulder. "Bathroom," he whispers and hurries along.

When he returns to their seats, he leans over to Sofia. "Who were you talking to?" he asks.

Sofia looks somewhat annoyed. "Just a friend," she says.

"Sorry," he says and leans back into his seat. "Didn't mean to be nosy."

"It's snowing quite a lot outside," says Sofia. "We should leave to make sure we get there in time."

There are four hours to departure, he thinks. There's no rush. "You're right," he says and reaches for his jacket. "I've missed half the movie anyhow."

In the taxi on the way to the airport, Sofia is quiet and distant.

"Is everything alright?" asks Marlon.

"Just tired," she says while staring out the window.

When they arrive at the airport, well in advance of departure, they camp out in the lounge, sitting in separate chairs without eye contact. Sofia continues acting distant and doesn't say much. Marlon figures that she is tired and needs some space.

On their way to the gate, Marlon receives a message from Mia, asking him what time he starts working

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tomorrow morning. Suspecting that she wants to meet, he responds that he has an early meeting outside Paris and needs to leave before eight. Mia writes that she has missed him. Marlon replies that he has missed her too. But it isn't true. Since leaving for Madrid, he has barely thought of her at all. Hopefully, she won't take it too seriously. After all, they've just met.

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“There must be something,” says Marlon.

“No,” says the woman behind the welcome desk. “We’re fully booked. Your reservation is for tomorrow. There is nothing I can do.”

Marlon looks at Sofia. “Rita must have messed up the dates. Let’s find you another hotel.”

“It’s almost two o’clock in the morning,” says Sofia. “I could sleep in the lobby for all I care.”

“I’m afraid that’s not allowed,” says the woman hastily.

“Sorry,” says Sofia. “It was a joke.”

Marlon pulls out his phone and starts browsing a list of nearby hotels. He calls the first one he finds, but they have no rooms available. He calls another one. Same answer. He calls a third. Fully booked. “Everyone is booked,” he says. “What’s going on?”

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"Don't you know?" says the woman, oddly upbeat. "It's Fashion Week."

Marlon takes a deep breath. "Where do you think I can find a hotel?" he asks calmly.

"The airport," says the woman. "They always have a room."

"We just came from the airport."

"How would I know?" answers the woman, quite rightly.

"Go home," says Sofia to Marlon. "I'll find something. Even if I need to go back to the airport."

"That's ridiculous," he says. "You'll barely have time to sleep."

"That's alright," says Sofia. "I'd be happy if I got one hour of sleep."

"Look," he says. "I've got an extra sofa at my place. Just for tonight."

"Okay. If that's okay with you?"

Marlon grabs his bag. "Let's go," he says. "It's less than ten minutes away."

Marlon wakes up six minutes before his alarm. He looks towards the sofa. Sofia is still asleep. He had insisted that she take his bed, but she firmly refused. He doesn't want to wake her, so he lies still until the alarm goes off.

Sofia opens her eyes. "What's the time?" she asks.

"Seven," says Marlon. "We should leave before eight to make sure we'll be there on time."

She sits up and stretches her arms. "Who gets the first round with the shower?" she asks.

"You can go first," says Marlon.

Sofia looks at him with a fresh morning face and messy hair. "Do you have a towel I can borrow?"

While Sofia is in the shower, Marlon inspects his empty fridge. The next second his doorbell rings. *That's weird*, he thinks. Nobody ever rings his doorbell.

Marlon puts on his bathrobe, walks over to the door, and looks through the peephole. It's Mia.

An uncomfortable weight builds up in his chest.

He stands still, hoping she didn't hear him. As he shifts weight to his other leg, the floor squeaks under his feet. *She definitely heard that*, he thinks.

He opens the door.

"I know," says Mia, smiling nervously. "I'm such a stalker. But your fridge must be empty after being away so many days." Mia holds up a paper bag and two cups of coffee. "I brought you some breakfast."

"That's very sweet," says Marlon.

"If you're in a hurry," she says, "just take the coffee and put the bag in the fridge. It's just some pastries."

Marlon feels weak, hesitating how he should tackle the situation.

Mia picks it up. "I'm sorry," she says, twisting her body. "I knew that this was a bad idea."

"No," he says. "This was a great idea."

Mia smiles.

"A colleague slept here last night," says Marlon. "We have that meeting I told you about. So we are kind of in a hurry."

"Of course," says Mia and hands Marlon the coffee cups and the bag with the pastries. "For both of you."

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Sofia opens the bathroom door and walks out, dressed but visibly newly showered.

Marlon observes Mia's face freeze in front of him.

"This is my colleague," says Marlon before realizing how bad it sounds.

Mia turns around and pushes the elevator button repeatedly.

"Give me ten minutes," he says.

"I need to go," says Mia, ditching the elevator and starts running down the stairs.

Marlon steps out in the hallway. "C'mon now," he yells after her. "I'm serious. This is a misunderstanding."

Mia stops and looks up at him. He doesn't know what to say. She shakes her head and continues down the stairs. Marlon stands still until hearing Mia leaving through the front door.

When he walks into the flat, Sofia looks at him with a wrinkled forehead.

"Sorry about that," he says.

"I thought you didn't have a girlfriend."

"I don't. We just met. We barely know each other."

"I could talk to her if you want."

"Thanks, but that's alright," says Marlon and puts down the coffee cups. "I'll be done in ten."

Minutes before nine, Marlon and Sofia arrive at a gated street in Neuilly-sur-Seine—a wealthy district west of Paris. They dial LaFontaine's residence, and a female voice lets them through the gate.

They walk past three rows of impressive townhouses before reaching a castle-like building with a tall royal

entrance. Marlon is impressed. He knew that LaFontaine had money but not this type of money.

Outside the residence, a short and elderly woman with thick dark hair introduces herself as Mona and welcomes them inside.

“Follow me,” says Mona with a French-Canadian accent. “He is soon done.”

Mona leads them through a grand hallway and into an enormous living room. The room is empty, containing nothing but a sofa covered in a white sheet and three sealed moving boxes. Floor-to-ceiling windows face a small but imposing garden outside.

Mona walks through the room, her shoes clicking against the polished parquet floors, and opens one of the windows. “The office is outside,” she says and leads them onto a cobblestoned courtyard.

Across the courtyard and next to the garden, stands a single-floor stone house.

Mona takes them to the house and opens the front door. “You can wait inside,” she says. “I’ll be back with coffee and tea.”

The small house is designed as a single room with stone tiled floor and four windows facing the garden. Placed in the middle of the room is a large wooden desk, identical to the desk in LaFontaine’s office. In one of the corners, opposite a fireplace, stands a low children’s table. The table has a globe placed in the middle, surrounded by colorful crayons and half-finished drawings. On the back wall hangs a row of large-framed portraits of Roosevelt, Churchill, de Gaulle, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini.

Marlon walks up to the desk. It’s filled with documents, books, and a few brochures of New Zealand real estate.

CROWD OF ONE

They hear footsteps against the cobblestones outside.

Marlon steps away from the desk.

LaFontaine enters the house, escorted by a scent of expensive cologne. He is newly showered, wearing a grey turtleneck sweater and a navy-blue jacket. "Welcome," he says. "There's breakfast outside."

LaFontaine greets both of them with a warm handshake and leads them to a table next to a dry fountain in the garden.

Mona serves them coffee, tea, and a basket of warm croissants.

"Mona is also from Quebec," says LaFontaine and lights up a cigarette. "She used to know my mother."

"How long have you lived in Paris?" asks Sofia.

"I've been in and out since my twenties," says LaFontaine.

"Anything new from the lead in Senegal?" asks Marlon.

"We got the surveillance video," says LaFontaine. "It was Jacob."

"That's good news," says Marlon.

"What happened?" asks Sofia.

"We don't know," says LaFontaine. "He came back a couple of days later. Then he disappeared again."

"Wait, what?" asks Marlon. "You haven't talked to him?"

"I can't figure it out," says LaFontaine. "It's like he's running."

"At least we know he's alive," says Sofia. "But didn't he lose all his belongings?"

"I'm asking the same question," says LaFontaine.

"I gave him some cash when we arrived," says Marlon.

"About five hundred euros."

"Still," says LaFontaine. "That's nothing."

“What do we do now?” asks Marlon.

“The police have dropped the case,” says LaFontaine. “The video shows that he is moving with free will. I don’t know what to say.”

They all exchange puzzled looks.

“Maybe,” says Sofia, “if we give him some time, he’ll come around eventually.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” says LaFontaine and puts out his cigarette and turns his body towards Sofia. “How’s the tea?” he asks.

“Warm,” she answers.

LaFontaine smiles. “Good,” he says. “Now, give me a rundown of what you two have been up to.”

Sofia understands that she has been asked to speak up. To introduce herself and to brief LaFontaine on what she’s got..

Marlon grabs his coffee and leans back.

Sofia puts down her teacup and clears her throat. She begins by breaking down their meeting in Belgrade before summarizing her thoughts on the Greek campaign, including details Marlon had overlooked.

LaFontaine nods his head approvingly. Then he turns to Marlon. “Seems like you two are teamed up already,” he says. “That’s good because this campaign could intensify faster than we expect.”

“When do we add more people?” asks Marlon.

“Not before the end of this week,” says LaFontaine. “When the pilot campaign is finalized. Until then, I want you to work from here, together with Arielle and Louis.”

“From your house?” asks Marlon.

CROWD OF ONE

“My family is away, so you can come and go as you like. We can still use the resources at the office, but the brain of the campaign will be based here.”

“Alright,” says Marlon. “Sounds good to me.”

“Good,” says LaFontaine. “I will bring in a few more desks, and we’ll figure out the rest as we go. Arielle and Louis will get here later tonight with a full report of the first day of the campaign. I’ll join you by phone from Berlin.”

20

It's Friday morning, the last day of the pilot campaign. LaFontaine has asked Marlon to meet with him at his office on the seventh floor. Marlon hasn't been at the office for the whole week. He, Sofia, Arielle, and Louis have been working full-time from LaFontaine's house.

Marlon is in a good mood when he steps out of the elevator. Their results have been above expectation. Much thanks to the new bots delivered by Miloš. Later today, they have a phone call with Mark Huber to review their progress. Marlon is looking forward to providing the good news.

"Sorry about the hotel last week," says Rita. "I don't know why I mixed up the dates."

Marlon had almost forgotten about it. "No problem," he says. "Everything worked out fine."

Marlon points at LaFontaine's door. "Can I go in?"

“Hold on a minute,” says Rita. “He is meeting with Mario. They should be done soon.”

“I didn’t know Mario was in town,” says Marlon.

“He came in this morning.”

Marlon sits down to wait.

Moments later, Mario exits LaFontaine’s office, smiling from ear to ear.

“What’s going on?” asks Marlon.

“It’s on,” says Mario. “We are meeting with Frank Borolo in Milano tonight.”

“You did it,” says Marlon and gives Marlon a hug. “Good job,”

“We all did it,” says Mario. “What about you, how’s it going?”

“On track,” says Marlon. “I’m expecting the client to give us the final go today.”

“Still confidential?”

“I’ll be able to fill you in by next week.”

“Alright,” says Mario. “Coffee later?”

“If there’s time. Otherwise, good luck for tonight.” They say goodbye and Marlon enters LaFontaine’s office.

“I met Mario on my way in.”

“That’s right,” says a smiling LaFontaine. “Borolo has invited me for dinner.”

“So, it’s happening?”

“I’ve worked out a number, and my offer expires this weekend.”

“What’s the catch?”

“We need to renegotiate our supplier contracts by next week. If Tricolore Media is the owner by then, they can probably use their power to cut up to twenty percent of the costs. If not, they’ll be buying a lot more fat.”

“What about the due diligence?”

“They’ll do what they can. But Borolo knows I’m too concerned about my reputation to screw anyone over. Saves everyone time and money.”

“Of course,” says Marlon.

“Let’s be honest,” says LaFontaine. “This deal barely qualifies for a press release at a company like Tricolore Media. They’re acquiring companies while the rest of us are asleep. Besides, our name won’t raise any eyebrows in the press.”

“That’s true,” says Marlon.

“Look and learn,” says LaFontaine. “Next time, you’ll be around the table too.”

Marlon smiles modestly.

“By the way,” says LaFontaine. “You are now the official co-owner of Athena Analytics Australia. All the paperwork went through this morning.”

“That’s nice to hear.”

“And I just talked to Mark. They’ve given us the go for the campaign expansion.”

“I thought the call was this afternoon?”

“That’s still on,” says LaFontaine. “But you know that call is about the campaign details. When it comes to the contract, Mark and I talk directly to each other.”

“Right,” says Marlon. “I understand.”

“Speaking of the call, Mario and I will be taking an early flight to Milan. Can you lead it by yourself?”

“Sure,” says Marlon. “No problem.”

“Good,” says LaFontaine and leans back in his chair. “Take out the team to celebrate tonight. Rita will help you to book a table at whatever restaurant you want.”

“Alright, thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. The expense is charged to Aristotle Research.”

“Oh,” says Marlon. “In that case, we might just order a few pizzas.”

LaFontaine laughs. “You’re starting to get it now, aren’t you?”

Marlon chuckles. “I’m just kidding.”

“I know you are. A good general never starves his troops.”

“By the way,” says Marlon. “Anything new on Jacob?”

LaFontaine’s drops his smile and lower his eyes. Marlon immediately regrets that he brought it up.

“Nothing,” says LaFontaine. “Not a sound.”

“I’m sorry,” says Marlon.

“Everything will work out,” says LaFontaine. “Jacob is a grown man. If he wants to run, we won’t chase him.”

“I know.”

LaFontaine looks at his watch. “You should get back to Neuilly,” he says. “Don’t tell the others about the green light from Mark. It’s better if they hear it directly from him.”

“Will do,” says Marlon.

When Marlon arrives at LaFontaine’s house, Arielle and Louis are glued behind their laptops.

“Where’s Sofia?” asks Marlon. “The call with Mark is in an hour.”

“I don’t know,” says Arielle and looks up at him. “I thought she was with you?”

Marlon picks up his phone and calls Sofia. The call goes straight to voicemail. She’s probably in the metro, he thinks.

"We got the final report on the bots," says Arielle.

"And?"

"It's insane," she says. "I think they pushed our net reach with a hundred percent. Maybe more."

"And that was only the pilot," says Marlon. "Miloš said that they can increase their capacity tenfold if we want."

"I hate to admit it," says Arielle, "but I love these bots."

"Let's downplay the figures in the call, though," says Marlon. "We don't want Mark to think they're doing all the job."

"Sure," says Arielle. "I'll highlight a twenty-something percent increase. It's still a good number."

Marlon sits down at a desk and starts preparing for the call.

Half an hour later, Sofia still hasn't arrived.

Marlon calls her again. The call goes straight to voicemail.

"Anyone heard from Sofia?" asks Marlon. "Her phone is shut off."

"Nothing," says Louis.

"Not since last night," says Arielle.

"If she doesn't show for the call, I'll take her part," says Marlon.

Thirty minutes later, the three of them are gathered around Marlon's desk to dial up Mark. Sofia is still absent.

The call goes well and Mark is happy with the results.

"Let's gear up," says Mark. "It's time to pull the plug on this whole Euro-madness."

When the call is over, Louis gives Marlon an enquiring look. "Isn't this a bit bizarre?" he says.

"What do you mean?" asks Marlon.

"All this, I mean."

CROWD OF ONE

"We've all read Paulsen's report," says Marlon. "It is what it is. We're merely the messengers."

"I agree," says Arielle. "Someone needs to help spread the facts."

"But still..." says Louis. "Our methods. Don't you think—"

"Who doesn't use psychological strategies when designing a message?" says Marlon. "The counter-campaign will play the same game. Let the people decide for themselves. They own the outcome. Not us."

Louis looks down at the table. "Yes, you're right," he says.

"C'mon," says Arielle, looking at Louis. "We're only doing our job."

"I know," says Louis. "Like you said, it's not like we are breaking the law."

"That's right," says Marlon.

"Exactly," says Arielle.

"Okay," says Marlon. "Let's summarize this and send it to the boss. I'll try to get a hold of Sofia."

Marlon picks up his phone and calls Sofia. Again, straight to voicemail. He calls Sofia's hotel.

"She checked out early this morning," says the hotel worker through the phone.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am. Exactly two minutes past six o'clock. It's logged in the system."

Marlon hangs up and calls Rita.

"Do you have the number to Sofia's sister?" he asks.

Rita gives him the number and Marlon dials. The number is disconnected. *This is just like Jacob*, he thinks. *Where the heck is she?*

Right then, Marlon receives an email notification from an unknown address. He opens it. It's from Sofia.

'Dear Marlon,' it reads. 'I am an undercover journalist. Together with Jacob Laroy, I have led an investigation into Atlas Analytica and its operations. Unfortunately, Jacob decided to abandon his mission during your stay in Abidjan. I have no information about his current whereabouts. The *Economic Times* owns the rights to the story. They will publish the first article of a series, starting next Wednesday. A draft will be sent to your CEO tomorrow morning, Saturday. He has until Monday evening to leave his remarks.'

Marlon stops reading. Black vaporizing spots starts disrupting his vision. He leans back in his chair and feels a stream of warm blood disappearing from his head.

"Are you okay?" asks Arielle.

"What?"

"You look pale."

"No, I'm good," he says. "Didn't eat any breakfast."

Arielle throws him an apple. "Think fast."

Marlon grabs it. "Thanks," he says and sets it next to him. Then he leans into his screen again, continuing to read Sofia's mail.

'I wanted to tell you in person,' it reads, 'but I have been legally advised not to. If you wish to contact me, please see my details below. All the best, Sofia.'

Marlon stands up and walks outside. He needs air.

Out on the courtyard, Marlon takes a deep breath and looks up at the cloudy sky. He stands still for a few seconds until the ground starts wobbling below his feet. He continues staring upwards, forcing himself to find his balance and not fall. He closes his eyes and lowers his

head. He pulls his fingers through his hair and reruns the content of Sofia's email in his mind.

This is bullshit, he thinks. An investigation into what? Illegal use of data? Propagating false facts? Using bots? Everything they do falls within the borders of the law. She is the one conducting an unlawful act. She is breaching a legal contract and leaking confidential information.

Marlon pulls out his phone and calls LaFontaine.

"Where are you?" asks Marlon.

"On the way to the airport. Why?"

"Listen carefully," says Marlon and starts outlining Sofia's email in detail. When he is done, LaFontaine answers in a calm tone. "Okay, I understand," he says. "Whatever you do, don't contact her and don't show that email to anyone, including me."

"You will probably receive the same information in a separate email," says Marlon.

"Yes, but now I know not to open it," says LaFontaine. "I cannot have this information before discussing with Borolo, you understand?"

"I understand," says Marlon. "What should we do?"

"Nothing. As for now, we act as if that email doesn't exist. I will call you tomorrow, and we will sort it out."

"Are you sure?" says Marlon. "Isn't there anything I should do?"

"Yes, sit tight and don't worry about it. She doesn't know anything about what we do, and as far as you go, you're all in the clear."

"What if she has found something that we aren't aware of?"

"Trust me," says LaFontaine. "Whatever they think they have, we are not breaking any laws. What's at stake here is

a future debate on privacy laws and our reputation. Let me take care of that. Go about with your day and keep this to yourself. Stick to the plan. Go out and celebrate tonight and take the day off tomorrow. Tell the others that Sofia got sick and had to go home. Everything will work out fine. Trust me.”

“Okay,” says Marlon, feeling reassured by LaFontaine’s confident tone.

They finish the call and hang up.

Although calmed, Marlon is still surprised by the way LaFontaine took the news. *Maybe this isn’t the first time he’s faced an attack like this*, he thinks. Coverage by the *Economic Times* would take Atlas Analytica into the spotlight. It could upset their clients, and it could kill the deal with Tricolore Media.

Marlon walks across the courtyard towards the garden. He sits down at the table next to the dry fountain.

Jacob had played LaFontaine, he thinks, and Sofia had played Marlon. Was it really that easy? Did Jacob betray his own brother for a piece of journalism? Marlon tries to put it together. Sofia had seduced him. She had used him. Marlon gets disgusted with himself. He never saw it in her eyes. She must be good, he thinks. A real con. A true liar. A professional rat. She’ll have it coming, he thinks. She has no idea what she is up against.

Marlon stands up and returns inside to Arielle and Louis. As ordered, he tells them that Sofia had called in sick.

“She’d been throwing up the whole morning,” says Marlon.

“Poor thing,” says Arielle.

CROWD OF ONE

“She’ll be fine,” says Marlon. “I’ll ask Rita to make us a reservation for dinner tonight. Do you want to bring anyone?”

“No,” says Louis.

“No, just me,” says Arielle.

Both Arielle and Louis are engaged, but they never seem to speak about their partners. Sofia had told Marlon that she thinks they might be having an affair. He had disagreed. Neither of them seems like the type, he thought. Now, he suspects that she might be right.

For the rest of the day, the three of them continue working as planned. They head out for an early dinner, sharing two bottles of wine and tunes out from a hectic week. Marlon does his best to suppress his thoughts about Sofia. He stores her far back in his mind. Soon, he thinks, she will become a bad memory. Another reminder to keep his guard up.

After the dinner, Marlon takes the metro straight back home. But when he arrives outside his building, he feels reluctant to enter inside. He stands still with his keys in his hand, observing the empty street in front of him. Some of the windows are lit up inside, beaming a welcoming warmth in the cold night. The feeling of home, he thinks, has never been further away. He puts the keys back into his pocket and starts walking towards place du Trocadéro.

Marlon orders a whiskey at the bar. He drinks it straight up. He orders another one and sits down at an empty table next to the windows.

He checks his phone. No messages, and only two percent left of his battery. *Whatever*, he thinks. LaFontaine said that he would get back to him by tomorrow. And he can forget about hearing more from Sofia. Like Jacob, she

is long gone already. He doesn't know any of them anymore.

After a few minutes, the alcohol starts kicking in. Marlon feels his mind drifting away and his tense nerves losing their edge. He lets his shoulders drop and relaxes his face muscles. He finishes his drink and looks over at the bar. This place is dead, he thinks. It's too quiet, too light, too much space for thoughts. He wants to be around people, feel the vibrations of loud music and get lost. Smell the scents of perfume, liquor, and cigarettes. He lights up his phone and orders an Über.

21

Marlon wakes up hearing a crackling sound of burning wood. His mouth is dry like ash, and his head is beating like a hammer against a steel bar. He struggles to lift his heavy eyelids and sees flickering flames dancing in front of him. He sits up straight and puts his feet on a soft oriental carpet. The walls surrounding him are covered with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. He has been here before, he thinks. He looks out the window and sees a familiar lamp post down the street. He is on the second floor of his building. How did he end up here?

Marlon tries to recollect his memories from last night. Undetailed flashbacks emerge in his mind. The bar in Saint Germain. The nightclub at rue Montmartre. The other nightclub off Avenue George V. The shots at the bar in-between. The taxi-driver who woke him up. And the elevator that didn't work. Right, he thinks, the elevator in

his building is broken. The last thing he remembers is sitting down on the floor, trying to figure out why.

The door opens. Mr. Dreyfus enters dressed in his burgundy-red bathrobe.

Marlon feels a tsunami of shame hitting down on him. "I'm so sorry," he says. "I don't know what—"

Mr. Dreyfus waves his hand. "Everyone is fine," he says. "Let's leave it at that."

"What happened?"

Mr. Dreyfus smiles. "You don't remember?"

Marlon looks down. "Not much I'm afraid."

"I found you sleeping in the elevator. You insisted that it didn't work."

"Yeah, it seems to be broken."

"The elevator works fine, but I couldn't leave you there."

Marlon shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he says and stands up, feeling the floor tilting to the side. "I don't want to cause you any more trouble."

"Come with me," says Mr. Dreyfus and turns around. "There's food in the kitchen."

Marlon goes through his pockets. Phone, bank cards, keys. It's all there. He gives himself some slack.

Mr. Dreyfus leads Marlon through a seemingly unused dining room. On the walls are large oil paintings in thick frames. They continue through a narrow corridor that leads back into a kitchen. On the wall hangs a collection of photos: a young man and a woman, a couple together with a small child covered in a bath towel, two young men dressed in military uniforms, and a young version of Dominique wearing a graduation hat.

Mr. Dreyfus catches Marlon observing the photos. "That's my foster parents," he says and points at the couple. "The small boy in the towel is me together with my biological parents, and that's Dominique, my daughter. You met her, right?"

"Only briefly," says Marlon. "Is that you?" he asks, pointing at the two young men dressed in military uniform.

"To the right," says Mr. Dreyfus.

Marlon points at the photo of Mr. Dreyfus and his biological parents. "When was that?" he asks.

"1942. Two years before my parents passed away."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Mr. Dreyfus puts his hand on Marlon's shoulder. "Let's sit down and eat."

The kitchen is small and doesn't live up to the grandness of the rest of the apartment. There are boiled eggs, bread, jam, and coffee on a table. Next to it is a vase of purple tulips.

They sit down opposite each other.

"Thank you," says Marlon. "I still feel ashamed for last night."

"In three years, you haven't produced a single complaint. I was starting to wonder if you were alive," says Mr. Dreyfus, chuckling.

"How did you get me inside?" asks Marlon and pours coffee into their cups.

"Dominique helped me."

"Is she still home?"

"No, she left this morning."

"I will thank her later."

"Buy her flowers," says Mr. Dreyfus and wobbles the coffee cup in his hand. "She likes that."

Marlon spreads jam on a warm slice of bread. “How long have you lived here?” he asks.

“Forty years. Five years after Dominique was born,” says Mr. Dreyfus and lights up in a warm smile.

While the food helps Marlon’s body to regain life, he continues to ask Mr. Dreyfus about his past. Mr. Dreyfus seems happy to relive stories from his younger years, and his energetic and lively eyes diverge from his tired and old body.

After losing his parents, Mr. Dreyfus was adopted by a couple who owned a small textile business on Rue du Sentier in northern Paris.

“When I took over,” says Mr. Dreyfus. “I asked Rudy to join the business. He is the one standing next to me in the photo.”

Marlon looks up at the two young men on the wall.

“That’s when everything changed,” says Mr. Dreyfus. “Unlike me, Rudy had a passion for what we did. He persuaded me to take a loan and expand overseas. That’s when things got interesting. Even for me. We went everywhere to source for the best deals. Rudy taught me to trust my gut feeling. Most importantly, to respect it.”

Marlon listens carefully.

“Most people don’t respect their gut feeling,” says Mr. Dreyfus. “But our gut feeling is the outcome of our past experiences and deep thoughts. Even before our own time. Deep-rooted behaviors have sometimes been cultivated for generations. That’s why we often can’t explain why our gut tells us what we ought to do. The scope of the gut is wider than the present reality of what we know. Remember that.”

Marlon nods.

CROWD OF ONE

“For every year, I realized how important Rudy was to me,” says Mr. Dreyfus looks at Rudy’s photo on the wall. “It’s funny,” he says. “We often think a mentor needs to be older than ourselves. Rudy and I were the same age. We mentored each other.”

“Where is he now?”

“He passed away when we were young.”

“Again, I’m sorry,” says Marlon.

“Don’t be,” says Mr. Dreyfus. “We all die. It can happen any day, any time. But there’s no end to life. There’s only an end to you.”

Marlon looks at the photos on the wall, wondering about Dominique’s mother. He wants to ask but doesn’t. Mr. Dreyfus would have mentioned her if he wanted to, he thinks.

Mr. Dreyfus wipes his mouth. “I need to lie down for a while,” he says and coughs.

“Can I help you with anything?” asks Marlon. “I can clean this.”

“No,” says Mr. Dreyfus. “Go home and get some rest.”

Back at his flat, Marlon plugs his phone to the battery charger and hits the shower. While shampooing his hair, he hears his phone coming alive by multiple vibrations. He reaches for a towel and gets out to review his messages.

Mario writes positive feedback from the meeting with Barolo.

Arielle asks about Sofia.

LaFontaine orders Marlon to be at his house at three o’clock this afternoon.

Marlon checks the time. It’s twenty minutes past two. He instantly orders an Über.

Forty minutes later, Mona lets him in at the front door.

“They are waiting for you in the back,” she says. “Can I get you anything?”

“You got an aspirin?” he asks.

Mona inspects his eyes. “You need sleep,” she says. “I’m sure your girlfriend already told you.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Mona lifts her eyebrows. “Then maybe that’s what you need.”

Marlon walks through the empty living room, across the courtyard, and opens the door to the small house. Inside, he is greeted by a pungent smell of tobacco and a thick cloud of smoke hovering above LaFontaine’s desk.

“There he is,” says LaFontaine with an upbeat tone.

Another man sits in front of him, facing Marlon with his back. A cloud of smoke emerges from the man’s mouth. “Mr. Chairman,” says the man, turning around. “Welcome.”

22

LaFontaine cuts off the edge of the cigar and hands it to Marlon. Marlon puts it in his mouth. He ignites the butane lighter and moves the flame under the cigar's foot. He sucks in the air with a few gentle puffs.

"Rotate it to get an even burn," says LaFontaine.

Marlon's mouth fills up with sturdy flavors, and his mind swirls up in a tobacco-filled swoosh. Seconds later, a dry and toxic sensation spreads from his tongue, out to his cheeks, and all the way down to his stomach. He sinks down in his chair and lets the cigar burn between his fingers. "Okay," he says. "Tell me, how bad is it?"

LaFontaine hands Marlon a printed document. "Why don't you read the article first."

Marlon looks at Erik Westberg. "I can only assume the worst since you are here," says Marlon.

Erik and LaFontaine smile at each other.

“Just read it,” says LaFontaine.

Marlon can’t tell if they are making fun of him.

“Take it outside and read it in solitude,” says LaFontaine.

“Make it a moment.”

Marlon looks suspiciously at the two men. Then he stands up and heads outside, carrying the article in his left hand and the cigar in the other.

He sits down in the garden next to the dry fountain. Although he finds the cigar’s toxic taste close to overwhelming, he takes another puff. He holds up the article and reads the headline, ‘The Secret Propaganda Machine, by Sofia Pereira.’

This is surreal, he thinks. Last week, he and Sofia sat out here together with LaFontaine, drinking coffee and discussing the Greek campaign. Marlon must give it to her. Like a street magician, she had schemed them right in front of their eyes.

Before he begins to read, Marlon has mixed feelings. He is both nervous and excited. Nervous about being accused of something illegal and excited about being part of a potential scoop. He takes another puff from the cigar and starts reading.

The article begins with a short but descriptive story of Marlon and Sofia’s visit to Belgrade. Marlon isn’t mentioned by name but labeled as the young manager and the right hand of company’s CEO. LaFontaine isn’t mentioned by name either. In fact, no person is. Instead, people are referred to by short character descriptions. For instance, Rita is the resourceful assistant and Miloš is the Serbian hacker. The only name explicitly exposed is the company’s, Atlas Analytica.

The article portrays Atlas Analytica as a self-proclaimed news and PR firm, a firm driven by a perverse superiority complex. It is accused of using online robots and devious communication strategies to undermine public opinion. It states that its employees are brainwashed with a wrongful conviction that its methods are innovative and serve as a tool to promote free speech. The article's central message is that Atlas Analytica's methods are illegal. An accusation that the *Economic Times* promises to expose through a series of upcoming articles, backed by legal experts. As a final teaser, to stimulate interest, the article asks the reader to look out for online stories that carry a negative tone about Greece. 'Because,' it reads, 'our next article will provide an in-depth view on how Atlas Analytica is planning to destabilize the entire Eurozone economy.'

Marlon reads the article twice. Although descriptive, it leaves out plenty of details. Perhaps they are saving their ammunition, he thinks. He stands up and walks back inside the house.

"So, what do you think?" asks LaFontaine.

"She knows more," says Marlon. "This is only a teaser."

"It doesn't matter," says Erik. "None of that junk holds up legally. There's no breach of data privacy. No contracts with hackers. They are trying to dream up something that doesn't exist."

Marlon looks at LaFontaine.

"It's true," says LaFontaine. "The girl may know about our operations, but, legally speaking, she has no idea where she is heading."

"What about Tricolore Media?" asks Marlon. "This could kill the deal."

“The deal is sealed, and there’s no turning back,” says LaFontaine. “What’s more, this whole thing will blow over in a couple of months. If we’re lucky, it might even attract more clients.”

“What about their forthcoming articles?” asks Marlon. “They claim to sit on legal expertise.”

“Those experts are probably smart people,” says Erik. “But they lack our clout. When they realize this involves people way above their heads, they will pull out. The *Economic Times* is a serious publication, but they pulled the trigger too fast this time. We will make sure they realize that.”

“How?” asks Marlon and looks at LaFontaine.

LaFontaine nods at Erik. “Break it down for him.”

Erik leans in towards Marlon. “The plan is simple,” he says. “We show our cards, crush the girl, and move on.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means that we keep quiet and let them publish the first article on Wednesday. In the meantime, I’ll produce a case that explains why the *Economic Times* lacks substantial legal evidence of its claims. The girl has violated a serious confidentiality agreement and promoted false information. We will make clear that we attempt to take legal action and pursue the matter with utter seriousness.”

“What about us?” asks Marlon. “How will this affect us?”

“Concerning you,” says Erik, “the past week you have not even been an employee of Atlas Analytica. First of all, this makes you a highly questionable character in her story. And together with similar arrangements with your colleagues, it messes up the entire narrative of her findings.

The owner of the *Economic Times* won't put up with such embarrassment. Like I said, they are a serious publication."

"What if Sofia goes at it alone?"

"Then I wish her luck," says Erik. "Your new owner, Tricolore Media, is one of the largest media companies in Europe. Whoever decides to pursue this will be buried in legal costs before they even begin."

"So none of us needs to seek legal representation?" asks Marlon.

"Unless you breached the speed limit driving to Belgrade, there's nothing to worry about," says Erik and chuckles.

"What can I say," says LaFontaine, "is that it was a nice try, but they underestimated the power of their opponent."

"And the Greek campaign?" asks Marlon. "Do we pull the plug?"

"Not necessarily," says Erik and looks at LaFontaine for approval. "If Mark's team is ready to continue, we have a lot to gain from that project."

"I haven't decided yet," says LaFontaine. "It makes us an easy target for further investigation."

"Kill it," says Marlon. "Once we get the spotlight on us, the European Commission might launch an investigation of its own. It would force us to disclose our database and algorithms—the entire value of the company."

LaFontaine puffs on his cigar.

"Not if we kill the girl's legitimacy," says Erik.

LaFontaine keeps quiet.

"I'm telling you," says Erik, "they won't do it."

"How could you know?" says Marlon.

Erik seeks out LaFontaine's eyes. "You've already sold the company," he says. "Why do you care? This project

will still make us a lot of money through the back door. We're all business people here, right?"

"I thought you were a lawyer?" says Marlon.

"Marlon is right," says LaFontaine. "This is the moment to pull back. Save our legacy. Make sure the company has a smooth transition to Tricolore Media."

Erik gives off a loud sigh.

"Can you excuse us for a moment?" says LaFontaine to Erik.

Erik stands up. "I have calls to make anyhow," he says.

LaFontaine waits until Erik has left the room. "I got an email from Jacob," he says, twisting his neck. "Like you told me, Jacob was in it with Sofia before he decided to abandon the whole thing. He didn't write that he was sorry. To me, that sounds like he wanted to continue but didn't have the stomach to pull through. That he is admitting to being a coward."

"I'm sorry," says Marlon.

"My own brother tried to go behind my back," says LaFontaine and scoffs. "Can you imagine?"

"We all make mistakes," says Marlon. "Even to the people we love."

"Why couldn't he say it to my face? I would have invited the discussion. He knows that."

"Maybe he was pressured?" says Marlon. "Something we aren't aware of."

LaFontaine shakes his head. "I don't know," he says. "I should've figured it out. He and his know-it-all colleagues. A bunch of self-proclaimed arbitrators of what's good or bad. They even seem to think that they stand above the law."

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"They don't understand the technicalities of what we are doing."

"And they are too lazy to find out."

"They will feel the consequences."

"You bet."

They pause for a few seconds. "Practically speaking," says Marlon, "where do we go from here?"

"We dissolve the Dutch company and put you on a plane to Australia. Leave all this behind us and move on."

"What about Mark?"

"I'll deal with him."

"And the deal with Tricolore Media?"

"I'll go to Milan tomorrow and make sure Borolo doesn't freak out about the article. Try to turn this into an advantage somehow."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take the week off. Go somewhere and gather your thoughts."

"I can stick around," says Marlon. "In case you need me."

"You've done enough. Do something fun for a change. Forget about all this."

"Alright," says Marlon. "I'll do my best."

"I talked to Gerard," says LaFontaine and smiles. "He said that you came by the restaurant and talked to that girl. The waitress. He said that you left together."

"Yeah," says Marlon and looks down at his hands.

"Gerard said she is a good girl. One of his best employees."

Marlon covers his bad conscience with a smile.

LaFontaine stands up. "C'mon," he says. "I'll walk you outside."

Out on the courtyard, Marlon sees Erik sitting at the table next to the dry fountain, talking into his phone and puffing on the stump of his cigar. There's something rootless about Erik, thinks Marlon. He is an agent. A mercenary. Someone who helps other people to drop their bombs. Just like Marlon.

LaFontaine puts his hand on Marlon's back. "I'll tell Erik you said goodbye," he says.

They walk through the empty living room towards the front door.

"I know things have moved fast lately," says LaFontaine. "Like we discussed, perhaps you question what the heck you've got yourself into?"

"I'm alright," says Marlon.

LaFontaine stops and looks at Marlon. "We all start climbing somewhere before we reach a view that tells us where we are and where we want to go. At one point you start seeing through the treetops, but it doesn't mean you have the whole view. Not just yet."

Marlon nods.

"Believe me when I tell you this," says LaFontaine. "Climb a bit higher, and you will set yourself up for a grander view and access more resources. That's what this Australian venture is all about. It's your ticket to the next level. A place where there are greater freedoms and more choice."

Marlon nods. "Of course," he says. "I understand."

LaFontaine pats Marlon on his shoulder. "You're young. You're just getting started. Remember that. You'll have time to figure it out."

23

It's late afternoon. Marlon has just finished his second coffee inside Le Coq Fumant. On his laptop are photos of his new rental unit in the Potts Point neighborhood of Sydney. It's double the size of this current flat.

Three weeks ago, the *Economic Times* published a public apology letter addressed to Atlas Analytica, admitting that their article on the company contained faulty claims. Tricolore Media had pressed charges against the *Economic Times* but agreed to an out-of-court settlement. But only with the publication itself. Not with Sofia. Her case was still pending in the French courts. Because she was a freelancer, she was facing the charges on her own. Everyone knew that she would be crushed, shamed, and made an example of. She breached her contract, spread fake news, and broke the law. What did she expect?

Marlon can't help but feel empathy for Sofia. He has even tried to write her a letter expressing his sympathy for her situation. But he can't get past the first paragraph. Every time he tries to write to her, he ends up staring at the screen. To her, he is just another corporate sellout, he thinks. A person without moral grounds or a sense of purpose in life. Someone who deserves to be sacrificed for the greater good. He tells himself to let her go, but it's hard. When he leaves Europe, he can move on, he thinks.

Marlon writes an email to his parents and attaches photos of his new apartment. 'There will be plenty of room when you come to visit,' he writes. He plans to surprise them with a couple of roundtrip tickets as soon as he settles in.

Money is good right now. LaFontaine has doubled Marlon's previous salary. He also netted thirty thousand euros when they dissolved the Dutch corporation and abandoned the Greek campaign. Although the campaign was booked at a loss for everyone involved, LaFontaine made sure Marlon was compensated for his efforts.

Tricolore Media bought Atlas Analytica for a substantial sum. And as the company's sole owner, LaFontaine's did very well. His wealth was secured.

Marlon leans back in his chair and looks out of the window. The air outside is wet and bloated gray clouds press down from above.

Over the last weeks, Marlon has mostly kept to himself. Mario has already moved to Milan to manage the post-merger process, and Isabelle has resigned. She and her boyfriend are moving to Switzerland. Marlon suspects that she is pregnant.

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He had tried to call Mia once, but she didn't pick up. He can't blame her. Although he would like to set things straight with her, he won't. It wouldn't be fair, he thinks. It's better if he leaves her alone. When he has moved to Australia, they will never meet again anyhow.

Marlon continues staring out of the window. He thinks about the terror attack, Paul, and the barefoot girl who used his phone to call her friend. Marlon still has the number in his dial-up list. Every time he thinks about it, he gets cold all over. He has contemplated calling. To see who picks up, or if anyone picks up at all. But he hasn't. For some reason, it doesn't feel right. Like picking in someone else's wound. It's none of his business.

Someone enters the bars. Marlon looks at the reflections through the window and sees an elderly figure dressed in a long robe. It must be Mr. Dreyfus, he thinks, arriving to make his daily call from the bar's landline.

Marlon turns around to say hello. He sees Mr. Dreyfus pointing out Marlon to another person following behind. Marlon sits up. Someone is here to see him.

A young woman with wavy brown hair walks up next to Mr. Dreyfus's shoulder.

Marlon's gut flips. What is she doing here?

Sofia walks over to his table.

"Hi," she says, looking down at him with her bright green eyes.

Marlon breathes in the scent of her perfume.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" she asks.

Marlon nods.

Sofia sits down opposite him.

A moment of awkward silence follows.

Sofia pulls down her sleeves over her hands. She takes a deep breath. "How are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm good, thanks."

"New job?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

Marlon hesitates.

"Don't worry," says Sofia and smiles nervously. "Even if I were recording you, nobody would dare to work with me anymore. And I would never do that."

"Australia," says Marlon.

"I'm happy for you," she says.

"Thanks."

Sofia looks down at her hands, fidgeting with her sweater.

"Do you want something?" asks Marlon.

"Tea," she says. "Tea would be nice."

Marlon gets the attention of a waiter and orders two cups of black tea.

They look at each other's hands.

"Do you remember when we drove to Belgrade?" says Marlon and smiles.

Sofia smiles back. "Of course."

"When I told you about my neighbor?"

"Sure."

"That's him. The man in the robe. The man you entered the bar with."

Sofia lights up. "It is?"

"I found out that he is less mysterious than I thought. He used to trade textiles. He's retired now."

"I met him outside your building. He asked me if I was looking for you."

“Funny,” says Marlon. “I guess he knew where I was.”

Sofia looks at him and then out the window.

“So, how are you doing?” asks Marlon, instantly regretting the question.

“I’m fine,” she says.

“I’m sorry. That was a stupid thing to ask.”

“Don’t be,” she says. “Didn’t you see? Tricolore Media offered me a job.”

“They did?”

“They asked me through their Twitter account. As a bad, sarcastic joke, I guess.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he says. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s not your fault,” she says. “I’ll be fine. Big sister, remember?” Sofia smiles.

Marlon wishes they could drop everything and start over from scratch. “So, you actually have a little sister?” he asks.

Sofia looks surprised. “Of course, I do,” she says.

“But you don’t share an apartment together, right?”

“Wait,” she says. “You think that was a lie?”

Marlon lifts his shoulders. “Well?”

“Everything I told you about me is true,” she says. “I never lied to you.”

Marlon leans back in his seat. “Never mind,” he says. “It’s fine.”

“I wish I could say that I’m sorry,” she says. “The guilt towards you is ten times worse than this stupid lawsuit they are trying to pin on me. The legal advisor at the *Economic Times* assured me that you and your colleagues would never be subject to individual prosecution. As long as you acted on orders, they would only go after the owners of the company. I was stupid enough to think that when all this was over, we would continue being friends.”

"Assuming the company was acting illegally," says Marlon.

"You still believe in that?"

"I do."

"In that case, why didn't you continue the Greek campaign?"

"You know why," he says. "Because of the circumstances."

"I understand that you take their side," says Sofia. "I get that. But to me, the fact that you walked away from the Greek campaign clearly tells me that something wasn't right."

"We dropped it because it could've killed the deal with Tricolore Media. People would lose their jobs. It became a priority."

Marlon hates himself for blindly taking Atlas Analytica's side. But he has to, he thinks. It's his team. It's his responsibility.

"Maybe you're right," says Sofia and takes a deep breath. "Anyhow, I didn't come here to argue with you, and I'm not blaming you for anything. Ironically, I worked on the Greek campaign myself. This means that I not only am I a failed whistleblower, I am also an accomplice to my own allegations." Sofia sighs at herself. "At least you guys stand up for each other."

"I have to ask," says Marlon. "Why didn't you publish the entire investigation in one piece? Why didn't you wait it out until you had all the facts?"

Sofia crosses her arms. "Because of the *Economic Times*," she says. "Jacob sold them the story before it was finished. They owned the publication process. They claimed that a series of articles would create more traction with the

readers. They were planning a price increase and needed a carrot to keep their subscribers on board.”

“What about Jacob?” he asks. “Doesn’t he take any responsibility for this?”

“I haven’t heard from him since he told me that he was out.”

The waiter arrives with two cups and a teapot.

“Why did you continue on your own?” asks Marlon.

“Why wouldn’t I?” she says and grabs the teapot.

“What if,” says Marlon and leans forward. “What if Mr. LaFontaine would help you to set things straight. Get rid of the lawsuit. Help get you out of this.”

Sofia pours tea into their cups. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I could talk to him. Try to work out a deal.”

Sofia looks up at him, enquiring his eyes. “He would do that?”

“I can reach out,” he says. “He would listen to me.”

Sofia looks away. “I don’t know,” she says.

“Well, think about it,” he says. “It’s an option.”

Sofia looks back at him. “Thank you,” she says. “I will.”

They resort to silence.

Marlon tastes his tea. “How is your family?” he asks.

“They are very supportive. I try not to worry them.”

“And the café?”

“It’s still there,” she says and smiles. “How about you? How is your family doing?”

“They’re fine. They’ll visit me in Sydney as soon as I settle in.”

“Because you’re done with Europe now, right?”

“Right.”

"It must be nice," she says. "To leave everything behind. Just like that."

"It is what it is."

"But you don't care, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"About what you leave behind?"

Marlon takes another sip of his tea. "Like I said," he says, "it is what it is, I guess."

Sofia slowly nods, looking unsatisfied with his answer.

The clouds darken outside, and a violent gust of wind rattles the window.

Marlon feels a drop of sweat traveling down his forehead. As he wipes it off, his stomach contracts, and his entire body heats up.

"Do you feel okay?" asks Sofia.

"Excuse me for a second," says Marlon and stands up. "I'll be right back." He starts walking towards the bathroom. On the way, he sees Mr. Dreyfus standing at the bar talking into a landline phone. Their eyes meet, and Mr. Dreyfus gives him a subtle wink.

Inside the bathroom, Marlon splashes cold water on his face and looks at himself in the mirror. It's time to get real, he tells himself. She made a lot of effort to come all the way out here. It must mean something. He cannot deny his feelings anymore.

Marlon returns to their table and sits down at his seat. "You know," he says.

"Before you say anything," Sofia interrupts. "I came here because something told me I had to. I can't explain it."

"You don't have to," says Marlon. "I—"

An ear-piercing sound of glass shattering comes from the bar.

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Marlon turns around and sees Mr. Dreyfus lying on the ground. His mouth is wide open, and his hands are pressed against his chest. A man at the bar jumps off his stool and inspects the body from above. Marlon stands up. "What happened?"

"He just fell," says the man.

Marlon runs over to Mr. Dreyfus and lifts his head. His neck is slack. His eyes are blank. He isn't breathing. "Call an ambulance," yells Marlon.

The barman gets on the phone.

Sofia comes up behind Marlon. "Does he have a pulse?"

Marlon places his fingers on Mr. Dreyfus's neck. "No."

"Start compressing," says Sofia and kneels next to Marlon. "I'll hold his head."

Marlon places his hands against Mr. Dreyfus's chest and starts compressing.

"Harder," says Sofia. "It doesn't matter if the ribs break."

Marlon feels the ribs bending under his hands.

A few other guests circle in around them, mumbling among each other.

Marlon begins using his full body weight in each push. "C'mon!"

Nothing changes. Mr. Dreyfus's body is still lifeless, and a light purple color starts spreading across his face.

As he continues the pushes, Marlon sees himself from afar, him on top of Mr. Dreyfus, and Sofia next to him. Then he gets flashbacks from Mr. Dreyfus's kitchen wall.

Something cracks under Marlon's hands. It must be one of the ribs. "Where's the ambulance?" he yells.

"They're on their way," yells the barman

Marlon pushes harder, trying to reach the heart, trying to revamp it, make it beat.

Marlon detects a movement. He places his ear against the chest. Nothing. He continues compressing. He won't stop until they arrive, he thinks. He needs to push harder.

Eventually, someone grabs onto Marlon's shoulder. "Not yet," he yells and continues pushing until a firm grip forcefully drags him away from the body. He looks up. It's a paramedic. Two of them. They rip open Mr. Dreyfus's shirt and place two patches on his chest. Marlon gets up on his feet, sweat dripping from his forehead. He leans against the bar to catch his breath.

Another paramedic enters with a stretcher.

Moments later, the room turns silent.

"What?" asks Marlon.

A paramedic shakes his head and gives Marlon a constrained look.

Sofia looks at him from the other side of Mr. Dreyfus's body.

"I'm sorry, Marlon," she says.

The paramedics move the body onto the stretcher and roll it outside. Marlon follows. "Where are you taking him?"

"Georges-Pompidou. Are you a relative?"

"No."

The paramedic slams the door in Marlon's face. Marlon watches the ambulance disappear up the road, past the entrance to his building and the empty apartment on the second floor. He hears distant sounds of a loud car engine, a police siren, and rubber tires screaming against the asphalt. He stands still on the sidewalk, feeling the cold winds pick up speed and the wet air scraping against his

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skin. He pictures Mr. Dreyfus's frail ribs breaking under his hands. Flexing, bending, and cracking like the branches of an old tree. Marlon quivers with nausea.

Drained from energy and filled with angst, he feels his battered spirit merging with the dark sky above, slowly suffocating between thick polluted clouds. His thoughts start spinning. His vision becomes blurred. A roaring and soaring noise drills into his brain. He feels overwhelmed, confused, more nauseated. He needs to puke. Not here, he thinks, and begins to move towards the trashcans across the road. After a few steps, his organs protest and force his stomach to contract. He stops and leans over, placing his hands on his knees. Something is wrong, he thinks. He can't breathe. He shuts his eyes, trying to gain strength. The loud roar intensifies. The ground starts vibrating under his feet. Something is closing in on him. The sound of sirens gets louder. He needs to move. He wobbles towards the trashcans. A bright light hits his eyelids.

"Marlon!" yells Sofia.

He looks up.

THE END

